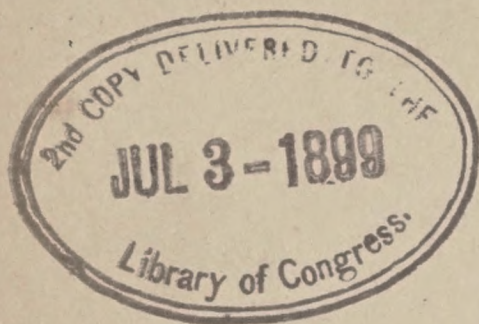




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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.





"I have come to consult you on a very important matter."

MY UNCLE

AND

MY CURÉ

BY

Jean de la Brète

Charbonnel, Mlle. A.

TRANSLATED BY

James W. Clarkson



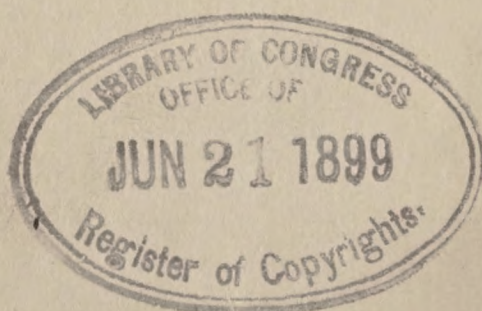
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MY UNCLE AND MY CURÉ.

CHAPTER I.

I AM such an exceedingly diminutive person that, except for the perfect proportion my head, feet, and hands bear to my stature, I should, in all likelihood, hear myself spoken of as a dwarf. But my face is neither so outrageously long nor ridiculously broad as are the faces we connect with dwarfs and such-like misshapen creatures, while, as for my extremities, there is many a fine lady would give her eyes to have them.

For all that, I have often wept bitterly in secret over the puniness of my dimensions.

I say *in secret*; for though my body be Liliputian it enshrines a proud and aspiring soul, a soul that would scorn to betray its little weaknesses to every chance acquaintance — above all, to my aunt. At any rate, I felt that way when I was fifteen. But persons with stiffer tempers than mine have

been forced to lower their crests before the vicissitudes, the cares, sorrows, joys, in a word, the discipline of life.

This aunt of mine was assuredly the most intolerable woman I have ever encountered. I thought her very ugly also — my experience was of too limited a character at the time to enable me to draw comparisons; still, I believe my estimate of her in this respect was correct enough. She had a vulgar face — all corners, — a shrill, harsh voice, a clumsy gait, and she was as tall as a steeple. It was simply ridiculous! When I stood beside her I looked like an insect, a shrimp; and when I spoke to her I had to throw my head back, as if I were trying to get a glimpse of the top of a poplar. She was of mean origin, and, like most people of her class, believed that brute force was the only thing in the world of any account; and so she was never tired of pointing the finger of scorn at my insignificant little person. Oh, it was crushing!

The moral constitution of my aunt was on a par with the physical. It was composed mainly of irritability and churlishness, and had certain sharp angles which the unlucky persons who had to live with her knocked their heads against daily.

My uncle, a country gentleman whose stupidity had been the common topic of conversation among his neighbors, was induced to marry her through pure weakness of mind and character. He died shortly after the wedding, and therefore I had no opportunity of making his acquaintance. When I was old enough to reflect on matters I laid his early demise at the door of my aunt, who had energy enough to drive a whole regiment of husbands to the grave, letting alone a poor creature like my uncle.

I was two years old when my parents went the way of all flesh, abandoning me to the tender mercies of circumstances, of life, and of — my family council.¹

They left behind them a very satisfactory remnant of what had once been a great fortune: some four hundred thousand francs invested in land, and bringing me in a pretty good income.

My aunt expressed herself willing to take

¹The *Conseil de Famille* is a body having extensive jurisdiction over minors and over such members of families as display an incapacity for managing their properties, whom they can reduce to the condition of minors. It consists of six of the nearest relations of the minor and a justice of the peace. It can approve or disapprove of a marriage, sanction or forbid the sale of property, and exercise a general supervision over all the interests of its ward. — Tr.

charge of me, not that she was at all fond of children; but, as my uncle had been a wretched manager, my aunt was not in good circumstances, and she saw with satisfaction that my entrance into her house would make life very easy for her.

And what an ugly house my aunt's house was! — a huge, dilapidated structure in which no attention was paid to cleanliness and order; a dunghill in the yard around it, mud and hens and rabbits everywhere. Behind stretched a garden in which there seemed to be every plant in creation, all sprouting up pellmell without anybody taking the slightest notice of them. I really think if my aunt and I had not thought it as well to give some attention to the matter no gardener would ever have been seen pruning the trees or tearing up the weeds that grew in all directions, just as they had a mind to.

This virgin forest was an offence to my eyes, for, even when a child, a love of order was second nature with me.

The name borne by the property was Le Buisson. It lay far back in the country, and was a mile and a half from the church and from a little village containing a score of cottages. Not a single château or villa or manor

for five leagues round. We were entirely isolated from the world. Sometimes my aunt would go to C—, the nearest town to Le Buisson. But it was only necessary for me to express a strong desire to accompany her for her to make up her mind never to take me there. The only incidents that broke the monotony of our lives a little were the arrival of the farmers with the quarter's rent for their farms and the visits of the curé.

Oh, what an excellent man my curé was !

He came to the house three times a week, having once, in a sudden fit of benevolent zeal, taken it into his head to stuff mine with all the knowledge he knew. He kept on to his task perseveringly, although I certainly used my best endeavors to try his patience. Not that I was specially dull-headed ; on the contrary, I learned with the greatest ease, but idleness was my pet failing. I loved it, cuddled it, and all the eloquence of the curé, as well as all his efforts to root out this plant of Satan from my soul, was so much lost labor.

And next — and this was the most momentous point of all — my reasoning faculties developed rapidly. I carried on discussions with the curé that drove the poor man half

crazy ; I sometimes took the liberty of advancing opinions that often slighted and shocked his most cherished convictions.

There was nothing I relished more than contradicting and teasing him, falling foul of all his beliefs, tastes, and assertions. This used to set my blood a-tingling and keep my mind on the alert. I rather suspect he felt pretty much the same as I did, and would have been seriously aggrieved if I had suddenly given up my quibbling and lost my independent ideas.

But I did not care, and my pleasure was at its height when I saw him jumping about upon his chair, ruffling his hair in desperation, and forgetting all the laws of propriety by stuffing snuff up his nose. This forgetfulness, however, never occurred except on occasions of the most critical character.

Still, if he alone had been concerned, I believe I might have occasionally resisted this temptation of the devil, but my aunt had dropped into the unlucky habit of attending my lessons, although she did not understand a word we were saying, and yawned at least ten times during the hour.

Now, any sort of contradiction, even when it had nothing to do with her own unsightly

person, worked my aunt up to madness, and her rage was intensified by the fact that she did not venture to say anything in the presence of the curé. Moreover, the spectacle of me presuming to argue with him appeared to her to be a monstrous inversion of the natural and moral order of the universe. I never made an attack on her point blank; she was a brutal woman, and I dreaded blows. Still, the mere sound of my voice — and I rather pride myself on its softness and beauty — had a most disastrous effect on her acoustic organs.

Now, considering the circumstances, it is easy to understand how impossible, how absolutely impossible it was to keep my love of mischief in check, when it enabled me to infuriate my aunt and, at the same time, to torment my curé.

And yet I was so fond of this poor curé of mine! — and knew perfectly well, that in spite of my trumpery sophistries, sometimes bordering on impertinence, he had the very greatest affection for me. I was not only the flower of his flock, I was preëminently his favorite, his work, the child of his heart and brain, and, mingled with this fatherly love, was a strain of admiration for my abilities, my words and acts in general.

He had set his heart upon his task, had taken a vow that he would train my mind and watch over me like my guardian angel, notwithstanding my wilfulness, logic, and skittishness generally. Besides, this task had speedily become the greatest charm of his life, the best, if not the only relaxation his monotonous existence allowed him.

Rain or wind, hail or snow, hot or cold, stormy or calm, nothing could hinder the curé from appearing before me, punctual to the minute, his soutane tucked up as far as his knees, and his hat under his arm. I do not think I ever saw him with his hat on his head at any time during my life. This fancy of his for walking bareheaded in the open air, with a smile on his face for the passers-by, the birds, and the tufts of grass, amounted to an absolute passion. His plump, round body seemed to rebound from the earth, which he trod with a springy gait, apparently saying to her, "You are good, and I love you!" He was content with life, at peace with himself, at peace with the whole world. His kindly face, fresh and rosy, with its crown of white hair, used to remind me of those late roses that are still blooming beneath the first snows of winter.

When he entered the yard the hens and rabbits would run up at his call and devour the crumbs he was careful to slip into his pocket before leaving the presbytery. Perrine, the poultry-maid, tripped forward to make him her best courtesy, and then Suzon, the cook, lost no time in opening the door and showing him into the drawing-room, where we had our lessons.

My aunt, sitting bolt upright in her arm-chair, as stiff as a poker and about as graceful, would rise when she saw him, give him a surly welcome, and at once dash headlong into the history of my transgressions. After this she dropped down with the same unbending rigidity, took her knitting in her fingers, her favorite cat on her lap, and waited, though she did not always wait, for a favorable opportunity to give me a piece of her mind. The good curé listened patiently to the shrill, harsh voice that set his teeth on edge. He bent his head modestly, as if the lecture were meant for himself, and, half-smiling, shook his finger at me. Thank Heaven, he knew my aunt of old!

We took our places at a little table near the window. This position had a double advantage: it kept us at a distance from my

aunt, who sat enthroned at the back of the room, near the chimney-piece, and, at the same time, allowed me to follow the movements of the flies and the flight of the swallows in summer, while in winter I could observe the effects of the snow and rime on the trees in the garden.

The curé set his snuff-box down beside him, placed his checked handkerchief on an arm of his chair, and we began.

When I was not inclined to be excessively idle matters took a good turn, at least as long as the point at stake was the correcting of my exercises; for, although I made them as short as possible I always worked hard at them. I wrote a good hand, and had a fluent style. The curé manifested his approval by frequently nodding his head, took snuff enthusiastically, and said repeatedly, "Good! Very good!" in all the tones of the gamut.

And during the whole time I was making a mental calculation of the number of stains on his soutane, and asking myself how he would look in a black wig, tight breeches, and a red velvet coat, like the articles worn by my grandfather in his portrait.

And the idea of the curé in wig and breeches was so comical that I roared.

Thereupon my aunt screeched out, "You little fool! Oh, you idiot!" and other compliments of the sort, more expressive than polite.

The curé looked at me with a smile, and repeated two or three times, "Ah, youth, youth! What a thing it is to be young!" and he sighed gently, recalling some memory of the time, perhaps, when he was fifteen.

But the recitation came next, and then things did not go on so swimmingly. It was the critical moment, the time for question and answer, interchange of personal opinions, discussions, nay, even disputes and high words. The curé had a passionate admiration for the heroes of antiquity and for those almost fabulous feats in which physical courage turned the scale. This fancy of his was rather queer, as he was not made exactly of heroic stuff himself.

I had noticed that he did not care to return home at night, and the discovery, while rendering me fonder of him than ever, — for I am a miserable little coward myself, — convinced me I was not laboring under any mistake in my estimate of his courage. Indeed, that calm, sedate soul of his had never even dreamed of martyrdom, never in the world. It was too much attached for that to the

unruffled routine of its existence, to the flock it loved, and, in fact, to the body in which it dwelt. I have seen him turn as pale as his rosy cheeks allowed when he happened to be reading about the tortures inflicted on the early Christians.

He thought it a very grand thing to jump into Paradise with one heroic leap, but he was quite content to jog along quietly toward eternity without fatigue or haste. He had none of those divine paroxysms that fill with a longing for death those who would behold the Ruler of time and creation at the earliest moment. Oh, by no means! He had made up his mind to depart without a murmur when his hour arrived, but he was sincerely hopeful it would be postponed to as late a date as possible.

I must acknowledge that excess of courage is not my strong point, so that this gentle and easy-going way of thinking suited me to a shade.

Nevertheless, he would never give up his heroes. He admired, exalted, loved them the more, perhaps, that he knew full well if the opportunity offered he was not at all likely to imitate them.

As for myself, I shared neither in his tastes

nor in his admiration. These Greeks and Romans of his aroused my utmost aversion. By an odd freak of my whimsical fancy I had come to the conclusion that the latter resembled my aunt, — or my aunt resembled them, just as you like, — and the very moment this affinity was established the Romans were tried, condemned, and executed forever after.

However, the curé was determined we should dabble in Roman history, and I was as determined on my side to have nothing to do with it. The great men of the Republic did not awaken my sympathies in the slightest, and I could not tell one emperor from another. It was all very well for the curé to burst into admiring exclamations, to pass from anger to argument and *vice versa*, it was impossible to shake me out of my indifference and my own way of looking at things.

For instance, I concluded my recital of the story of Mucius Scaevola with this remark :

“He punished his right hand because it made a mistake. What an idiot he must have been !”

The curé, who had been listening to me the moment before with an air of entire content, started up, indignant.

“An idiot, mademoiselle? And why, pray?”

“Because the loss of his hand did not repair the mistake,” I answered. “It did not hinder Porsenna from being alive and kicking, and the poor secretary was not any the better for it, either.”

“Well, perhaps you’re right, little one; but it so alarmed Porsenna that he raised the siege immediately.”

“Which only shows, M. le Curé, that your Porsenna was a dastard.”

“Even so. Still, Rome was delivered, and thanks to whom? Thanks to Scævola and his heroic deed!”

And the curé, who would shiver at the mere notion of burning the end of his little finger, and was, therefore, perhaps the more inclined to sing the praises of Mucius Scævola, strained every nerve to get me to appreciate his hero.

“I stand by what I have said,” I returned calmly; “he was simply an idiot, an out-and-out idiot!”

And then the curé gasped out with difficulty:

“When children take to reasoning, men must expect to hear a good deal of nonsense.”

“M. le Curé, you taught me only the other day that reason is one of our noblest faculties.”

“Of course, of course, when we know how to make use of it; but I was then speaking of full-grown men and not of little girls.”

“M. le Curé, the little bird tests its powers on the edge of its nest.”

The worthy curé was evidently rather put out, and ruffled up his white hair with such energy that his head looked not unlike the mop of a broom, if the mop were powdered.

“You are too fond of arguing, my child,” he would sometimes say; “it is a sin of pride. I shall not be always here to answer you, and when you are face to face with life you will learn that endurance and not argument must be your weapon.”

Life indeed! It was but little I cared for life; as long as I had a curé to exercise my logic on I had all I wanted.

When I had teased and plagued and harassed him to the top of my bent he made vain endeavors to assume an expression of severity. He had to give the attempt up, for his mouth always smiled and refused absolutely to obey his will.

Thereupon he used to say:

“Mademoiselle de Laval, you will go over

your Roman emperors again, and in such a way, I hope, as not to confuse Tiberius with Vespasian."

"Oh, M. le Curé," I answered, "let us drop these tiresome people, they bore me! Why, you know if you had lived in their time they would have broiled you alive on a gridiron, or torn out your tongue and nails, or chopped you up into mincemeat!"

At this gloomy picture the curé started slightly, and, without deigning a reply, he tripped out of the room.

I knew that when he called me "Mademoiselle de Laval" his displeasure had reached its climax. This ceremonious title was the strongest proof of his dissatisfaction, and I always felt remorseful, until I saw him coming again, with his disordered hair and smiling lips.

CHAPTER II.

MY aunt abused me shamefully when I was a child, and I had such dread of blows that I obeyed her orders without ever venturing to dispute them.

She beat me even on the very day when I

reached my sixteenth year, but it was for the last time. From that day, a day fruitful in events of personal interest, a revolution that had been smouldering in the depths of my soul for some months suddenly burst into flame and completely altered my relations with my aunt.

At this time the curé and I were reviewing the history of France, and I cherished the notion that I knew it pretty well. In fact, taking into account the gaps and expurgations of my book, my knowledge of it was as good as I could very well have acquired.

Now, the love the curé professed for our kings bordered on adoration, and yet he did not like Francis I. This antipathy of his was the more extraordinary, as Francis was a valiant knight and has always been popular. But he was not to the taste of the curé, who never lost an opportunity of criticising him, and so, in a spirit of contradiction, I chose him for my favorite.

On the day to which I have previously alluded, the lesson I had to recite dealt with this new friend of mine, and I spent a part of the day before in trying to discover some way of dazzling the curé's eyes with his glory. Unfortunately I could only repeat

the words in my history, backing them up with opinions that were based more on feeling than reason.

I must have been cudgelling my brains for more than an hour when a brilliant idea flashed on my mind.

“The library!” I exclaimed.

Without a moment’s delay I rushed down a long corridor, and, for the first time in my life, entered a moderate-sized room, the walls lined with shelves and covered with books, which were knit together by a multitude of delicate cobwebs.

It communicated with the apartments of my uncle, which had never been opened since his death ; it smelt so close and mouldy that I was almost suffocated. I quickly threw open the window, which was very small and had neither shutters nor blinds ; it looked out on the most neglected corner of the garden.

And then I proceeded to investigate. But what chance had I of discovering Francis I. among all these volumes ?

I was nearly giving it up when a little book met my eyes, and I shouted for joy. It contained the biographies of the kings of France who reigned before Henry IV. A fairly good portrait of Francis I. in the splen-

did costume of the Valois preceded his biography. I examined it with astonishment.

“Is it possible,” I said to myself, in my surprise, “that such handsome men are in existence?”

The biographer, who did not share the curé’s dislike of my hero, gave him unlimited praise. He spoke with sincere enthusiasm of his beauty, valor, his chivalrous nature, and his enlightened protection of literature and art. He concluded with a few lines on his private life, and I learned a thing of which I had been entirely ignorant before, namely, that

“Francis I. led a joyous life and was prodigiously fond of women. But his preference was largely and sincerely in favor of the beautiful Countess Anne, to whom he gave the county of Étampes, raising it to the rank of a duchy, in order to render himself very pleasing to her, — ‘pour lui être moult agréable.’”

From these words I deduced the following conclusions: In the first place, as I had discovered a month ago that I was having a very dull time of it, that I was in need of many things, and that the possession of a curé, an aunt, hens, and rabbits was not enough of itself to ensure a person’s happiness, it was plain to me that, since a joyous life was the

very reverse of mine, Francis I. showed great judgment in going in for it.

In the second, that he must have, certainly, been well grounded in the holy virtue of charity preached by my curé, since he was so fond of women.

In the third, that Countess Anne was a lucky person, and I should have been well pleased if some king had given me a county and raised it to the rank of a duchy, in order to be "moult agréable" to me.

"Bravo!" I cried, throwing the book up to the ceiling and catching it nimbly again. "I have all I need for bringing the curé to a stand and converting him to my opinion."

I read the little biography over again in my bed at night.

"What a fine man this Francis I. must have been!" I said to myself. "But how is it the author speaks only of his affection for women? How is it he says nothing of his fondness for men? Well, every man to his taste! But if I am to judge of women by what I see of my aunt I fancy I should have a very decided preference for men, myself."

Then it occurred to me that the biographer belonged to the male sex, and that, from a feeling of amiability and modesty, he had

thought it due to courtesy to say as little as possible of those of his own gender.

And, with this luminous idea in my head, I fell asleep.

When I rose the next morning I was in a very contented frame of mind. In the first place, I was sixteen; in the second, the face of the small figure which my looking-glass reflected was not unpleasing by any manner of means. Next, I spun two or three times round on my heel when I thought of how my newly acquired knowledge would embarrass the curé.

I was so impatient that I had taken my seat at the table long before he entered, ruddy and smiling as usual. As soon as I saw him my heart beat a little faster, as a great captain's does on the eve of battle.

"And now, my child," said he, when the exercises were corrected and the expression of his countenance had told me what he thought of their laconism, "let us pass to Francis I. and examine him from every point of view."

Making himself as comfortable as he could in his arm-chair, he took his snuff-box in one hand, his handkerchief in the other, and prepared for the discussion he knew could not be avoided.

I was ready. I charged right down on my subject. I grew excited, impassioned, enthusiastic. I dwelt largely on the qualities described in my history; then I passed on to the special information I had recently imbibed.

“And oh, M. le Curé, what a charming man he was! His figure was majestic, his face noble and beautiful, and his pointed beard was so pretty, and his eyes were so fine!”

I paused a moment to recover breath; and the curé, absolutely scared out of his wits, jumping bolt upright like one of those little imps on wires enclosed in pasteboard boxes, cried: “Where did you get all this trash, mademoiselle?”

“That’s my secret,” I answered, with a little mysterious smile, and burning my boats behind me. “M. le Curé, I don’t know what harm this poor Francis I. ever did you. Are you aware that he had a great deal of common sense? He led a joyous life and was prodigiously fond of women.”

Then the eyes of the curé opened so wide that I dreaded they would start out of his head. “Saint Michael! Saint Barnabas!” he ejaculated, and his snuff-box dropped out

of his hand, making such a clatter that the cat leaped from the chair where it was lying, with a piercing wail.

My aunt, who was sleeping, woke up with a start, and cried: "You vile wretch!"

This was intended for me, not for the cat, although she had not the slightest idea what was the trouble. But it was a phrase with which she invariably opened and ended all her discourses.

Most assuredly I had hoped to produce a great impression, but this was more than I bargained for; the extraordinary change in the face of the curé frightened me a little.

However, after a few moments I went on, composedly: "He was particularly fond of a beautiful lady to whom he gave a duchy. You must really acknowledge, M. le Curé, that he was very kind-hearted and that it would be delightful to be in the place of Countess Anne!"

"Holy Mother of God," murmured the curé in a choking voice, "the child is possessed!"

"What is the matter?" cried my aunt, running one of her knitting-needles through her back hair. "Turn her out if she dares to be impertinent."

“My child,” continued the curé, “where did you come across all you have just been telling me?”

“In a book,” I answered curtly, not saying anything about the library.

“And how came you to repeat such abominable things?”

“Abominable things, indeed!” I returned, scandalized. “What, M. le Curé! in your eyes it was an abominable thing for Francis I. to be generous and to love women? Upon my word! So then you do not love them, M. le Curé?”

“What is she saying?” howled my aunt, who had been for some moments an attentive listener, and considered this last question of mine simply awful in its direful significance. “You bold-faced jade! You” —

“Hush, my good lady, hush!” interrupted the curé, apparently relieved from a heavy weight. “Allow me to come to an explanation with Reine. Let us see — tell me what has struck you as particularly praiseworthy in the conduct of Francis.”

“In truth, the whole matter is very simple,” I answered somewhat scornfully, for I was beginning to think my curé was showing signs of his age and getting just a

little dull-witted. "Not a day passes that you don't preach me a sermon on the love of our neighbor, and surely Francis I. was always acting on your favorite maxim: 'Love your neighbor as yourself for the love of God!'"

The words were hardly out of my mouth before the curé, wiping off the big drops of perspiration that rolled down his cheeks, fell back in his chair, and, his two hands crossed on his stomach, gave way to a fit of Homeric laughter of such a length that it brought tears of anger and rebellion to my eyes.

"I see," I said, my voice trembling, "it was very ridiculous in me to take such pains with my lesson and try to prove to you that Francis I. was worthy of your admiration."

"My dear little child," said he, as soon as he had regained his composure, using the form of address he always employed when he was pleased with me, which, considering the circumstances, rather surprised me, "my dear little child, I was not aware you set so high a value on those who practise the virtue of charity."

"At any rate, I don't see what there is to laugh at," was my sulky answer.

"Oh, come now; we must not get angry!"

And the curé, giving me a little pat on the cheek, broke off the lesson, said he would return next day, and started to capture the key of the library, for he knew where my erudition came from, although I had no suspicion of it.

He was not yet out of the yard when my aunt made a rush at me and shook me by the shoulder until it was half out of joint.

"You — you wretched chatterbox! What have you been saying, what have you been doing, to drive the curé away so early?"

"Why do you fly into such a passion," said I, "when you don't know anything at all about what occurred?"

"Ah! I don't know? I did not hear what you said to the curé, you shameless girl?"

As she stood in need of more than words to slake her anger, she gave me several sound boxes on the ear and elsewhere, and then bundled me out of the room with no more ceremony than if I had been a little dog.

I fled to my chamber, where I bolted myself in securely. My first care was to take off my gown and verify in the looking-glass the blue marks the hard, bony fingers of my aunt had left on my shoulders.

"You mean little slave!" I said, shaking my

fist at my image, "are you going to stand this sort of thing forever? Are you such a base coward as to be daunted by the mere thought of a revolt?"

I took myself to task in this stern fashion for a few moments; then the reaction came, and, falling upon a chair, I broke into a fit of weeping.

"What have I done," I thought, "to be treated in this way? Was there ever such an odious woman? And why did the curé look so queer when I was reciting my lesson?"

And I had to laugh, though the tears were still streaming down my cheeks. The problem was too much for me. No use beating my brains about it—I had to give it up.

Drawing near to the open window, I gazed sadly out on the garden, and was beginning to regain my self-control, when I thought I recognized my aunt's voice; she was talking to Suzon. I leant forward so as to hear what they were discoursing about.

"You are wrong," Suzon was saying; "the girl is a child no longer. If you abuse her as you are doing she will complain to M. de Pavol, and in that case you'll lose her."

"I'll believe that when I see it! A great likelihood of her thinking of her uncle! Why, she scarcely knows of his existence!"

"Bah! She's a sly little thing, she is! It will take but mighty little to jog her memory, and then, if you make her unhappy, where are you? She'll go, and the nice income you get through her, along with her."

"Well, well, that's yet to be seen. I won't beat her again, but" —

They separated, and I could not hear the end of the sentence.

After dinner, at which I did not put in an appearance, I went to look for Suzon.

Suzon had been my aunt's friend before becoming her cook. They fell out ten times every day, but could not get along without each other, for all that. I may not be believed when I say that Suzon had a sincere affection for her mistress, but it is the exact truth.

However, though she may have forgiven my aunt her rise on the social ladder, as far as it concerned herself personally, she must have held her neighbor and things in general responsible for it, for she was continually grumbling and croaking. She was as grim visaged as a highway robber, and always wore

a short petticoat and flat shoes, although she never went to town to sell milk, and her imagination did not lead her a dance, like that of Perrette.

“So, then, Suzon,” said I, confronting her in my most impressive manner, “I am rich, am I not?”

“Who has been putting such nonsense in your head, mademoiselle?”

“That’s no affair of yours, Suzon, but I insist on your answering and telling me also where my uncle De Pavol lives.”

“You insist—insist, indeed! Upon my word, there are no children nowadays! Go about your business; I shan’t tell you anything, because I don’t know anything. There!”

“You know you are lying, Suzon; besides, I cannot allow you to address me in such a tone. I heard your talk with my aunt only a short while ago.”

“Then, mademoiselle, if you did, there is no reason why you should ask me to speak about it.”

Suzon turned her back and refused to answer a single question.

I went again to my room in anything but a good temper, and, resting my elbows on the sill of the window, I called the moon, the

stars, the trees, to witness the irrevocable determination to which I had come. Never again should I allow my ears to be boxed, never again should I be afraid of my aunt, and never again should I omit any opportunity that my ingenuity could supply of being disagreeable to her — never !

And, with the petals of a flower which I was plucking and dropping from my hand, I flung to the winds all the hesitation and fear and timidity that I felt in other days. Then I knew I was no longer the same person, and I sank to slumber, consoled.

During the night I had a dream : my aunt, transformed into a dragon, assaulted Francis I., and, with his mighty sword, the hero clove her head in twain. He caught me up in his arms and bore me off, the curé looking on despairingly, and wiping his face with his checked handkerchief. Then he wrung it out with all his strength, and the perspiration ran down from it in streams, as if he had steeped it in the river.

CHAPTER III.

SCARCELY were the curé and I seated the next morning at our table when the door was dashed open and Perrine appeared, with her hat hanging over her shoulders.

"Is the house on fire?" asked my aunt.

"No, madame, but the devil is among us, sure enough! The cow has got into the barley-field, which looked so promising; she is ruining everything and I can't get at her; the capons are all on the roof; and the rabbits in the kitchen garden."

"In the kitchen garden?" cried my aunt, leaping to her feet and looking at me with fury in her eyes, for the aforesaid garden was a sacred spot, and the object of her solitary love.

"And my fine capons, too!" groaned Suzon, who thought it proper to come on the scene also, and unite her harsh cackle to the shrill tones of her mistress.

"Oh, you reptile!" screamed my aunt.

She hurried after her servants, slamming the door behind her in her rage.

"M. le Curé," I hastened to say, "do you think the entire universe holds another woman as abominable as my aunt?"

"Eh, my dear child? What do you mean by that?"

"Do you know what she did yesterday, M. le Curé? She beat me!"

"Beat you?" repeated the curé incredulously, for it seemed to the good man utterly impossible that any one should lay a finger, except in the way of kindness, on such a delicate little body as myself.

"Yes, beat me; and if you doubt my word I am going to show you the marks of the blows."

And I began at once to unbutton my gown. The curé turned his eyes away in terror.

"There's no necessity, no necessity! I take your word for it," he cried hurriedly, his face crimson and his eyes modestly lowered to the tips of his boots.

"Beat me on the very day I was sixteen!" I returned, fastening the loosened buttons. "Do you know, I loathe her!"

And I struck the table with my fist, and it hurt horribly, too.

"Come, come, my child, do try to be calm," said the curé with emotion. "Tell me what you did."

"Did? Nothing at all! Just when you left she called me a shameless girl and threw

herself on me like a fury. Oh, but she is an abominable woman !”

“Now, now, Reine, really — You know we are bound to forgive injuries.”

“Ah, you don’t say so !” I cried, kicking back my chair and stalking up and down the room. “Forgive *her* ? Never !”

The curé now rose also and stepped out from the side in front of me ; so our dialogue went on without pause as we passed from end to end of the apartment, crossing each other every time, like the Ogre and Jack the Giant-killer, when Jack stole the seven-league boots and the Ogre pursued him.

“But Reine, you ought to be reasonable and accept your humiliation in a spirit of penitence, for the remission of your sins.”

“My sins !” I said, halting, and slightly shrugging my shoulders ; “you know well, M. le Curé, they are so trifling it’s scarcely worth while speaking about them.”

“Indeed !” rejoined the curé, who could not repress a smile. “Then, as you are a saint, you must bear your afflictions patiently for the love of God.”

“By my honor, no !” I answered, with decision. “Nothing pleases me better than to love God — a little — not too much, — oh !

you need n't frown, M. le Curé, — but I expect him to love me enough not to like to see me miserable."

"What a madcap!" cried the curé. "And it is I who am responsible for her education!"

"In a word," I continued, resuming my march, "I will be revenged, and revenged I shall be!"

"Reine, all this is very wrong. Be silent and attend to me."

"Vengeance is the delight of the gods," I answered, leaping up to catch a big fly that was whisking round above my head.

"Now, my dear child, let us talk seriously."

"Never was I more serious in my life," said I, stopping a moment in my course before a glass and discovering, not without some complacency, that a little excitement was rather becoming to my complexion. "You'll see, M. le Curé! I intend getting a sabre and decapitating my aunt, as Judith did to Holofernes."

"The child is out of her senses!" cried the curé hopelessly. "Will you be quiet, mademoiselle, and stop your rigmarole?"

"Of course — to please you, M. le Curé;

but you admit, then, that Judith was no better than she ought to be ? ”

The curé backed up against the chimney and delicately introduced a pinch of snuff into his nostrils.

“ Allow me, my dear. It all depends on the point of view.”

“ And you call yourself logical ! ” I retorted. “ You call the deed of Judith sublime, because she delivered some wretched Jews who were not worth two straws, and who ought to have but little interest for you, since they have been dead and buried time out of mind ! And you think it very wrong in me to do the same for my own deliverance ! And God knows I am very much alive ! ” I added, whirling round several times on my heels.

“ You have a good opinion of yourself,” said the curé, who was doing his best to look stern.

“ Oh, yes, indeed, an excellent one ! ”

“ Hum ! Well, are you willing to listen to me now ? ”

“ I am sure,” I went on, following my train of thought, “ Holofernes was a far pleasanter person than my aunt, and, if we had met, he and I would have been hand and glove. Con-

sequently, I don't see what is to hinder me from imitating Judith."

"Reine!" cried the curé, stamping on the floor.

"My dear curé, don't get angry, I beg; you may feel assured that I have abandoned my intention of killing my aunt; I have discovered another method of vengeance."

"Well, tell me what it is," answered the worthy man, already mollified, and sinking on a sofa.

I sat down beside him.

"It's this: you have heard of my uncle De Pavol?"

"Certainly; he lives near V—."

"Very well, then. How is his estate called?"

"Le Pavol."

"Then if I addressed a letter to the Château de Pavol, near V—, the letter would arrive safely?"

"Decidedly."

"Well, then, vengeance is within my grasp. You know that though my aunt does not love me she has no objection to pocketing my money?"

"But, child, where did you find all this out?" said the curé, bewildered.

"I heard it from herself, so it's a dead certainty. There is nothing she dreads so much as that I should appeal to M. de Pavol and ask him to take me to live with him. I'll frighten her with the threat of writing to my uncle, and it is n't at all unlikely," I continued, after a moment's reflection, "that I may not do so some day or other."

"Well, I do not see any great harm in that," said the good curé, smiling.

"Then you agree with me!" I cried, clapping my hands; "you approve!"

"Yes, my dear, up to a certain point, for there is no reason in the world why you should be beaten; but no impertinence — I forbid it. Use your weapon only for purposes of lawful defence, and remember that, whatever be your aunt's failings, you are bound to respect her. You must not be aggressive."

I pouted in a way that meant a good deal.

"I make no promises — or rather, to be frank with you, I promise to do the exact opposite of what you have advised."

"Why Reine, this is downright rebellion! You will make me angry in the end."

"It is more than a rebellion," I answered impressively, "it is a revolution!"

"She'll be the death of me at last!" mur-

mured the curé. "Mademoiselle de Laval, do me the favor of submitting to my authority."

"Please listen to me," I returned coaxingly. "I love you with all my heart; why, you are the only person I love in the whole world!"

The curé's face brightened up at once.

"But I hate my aunt — the very thought of her makes my blood run cold; on this point I am as firm as a rock. I am a far cleverer person than she is" —

Here it was overcast again, and he interrupted me with a sharp exclamation.

"Don't contradict," I rejoined, looking down at him, "for you know well you are of the same opinion."

"And this is all my teaching has done!" murmured the curé despondently.

"M. le Curé, my salvation is in no danger, so you may take the matter easy. You and I are sure to meet in heaven some day or other. Allow me to continue. Being far cleverer, then, than my aunt, I shall find no trouble in driving her distracted, simply by the use of words. Yesterday evening I made a solemn vow that I should be a thorn in her side, and I took the moon and stars to witness my oath."

“Child,” said the curé gravely, “you refuse to hear me, and you will yet repent of it.”

“Oh, that’s to be seen! But I hear my aunt coming; she is furious; it was I who let loose the cow and rabbits and capons. I wanted a chance to be alone with you. Give her a good scolding, M. le Curé. I assure you she beat me awfully; the black marks are still on my shoulders.”

My aunt entered like a hurricane, and the curé, who was quite thunderstruck, had no time to answer me.

“Reine, come here!” she cried, crimson with anger and with her wild hunt after the rabbits.

I made my stateliest bow, and with a significant glance at my ally said: “I leave you with the curé.”

Luckily the window was open.

I leaped to a chair, strode across the window-sill and slipped down into the garden, to the utter bewilderment of my aunt, who stood in front of the door, ready to cut off my retreat.

I confess I pretended to take to my heels; but I did nothing of the sort. I hid behind a laurel, and the ecstasy with which I listened to the curé’s reproaches and my aunt’s furious answers baffles description.

At dinner in the evening she looked about as pleased as a dog does that has been despoiled of his bone. She scolded Suzon, who gave her as good as she got, flung the silverware violently on the table, and the noise she created was really terrible; at last, exasperated beyond endurance by my impassive, ironical demeanor, she seized a decanter and hurled it through the window.

I at once laid hands on a dish of rice, which she had not yet tasted, and sent it to keep company with the decanter.

My aunt was on her legs directly.

"Don't come near me, at your peril," I said, retreating. "Touch me, and I write this very night to my uncle De Pavol."

"Ah!" cried my aunt, who stood as if turned to stone, her arm still uplifted.

"If not to-night," I added, "certainly to-morrow, or in a few days. I am determined not to allow you to beat me."

"Your uncle will not believe you!" exclaimed my aunt.

"Won't he, though? Your fingers have left their marks on my shoulders. I know he is very kind-hearted, and I am going to live with him."

I certainly had no idea as to whether my

uncle was kind-hearted or not, for I was only six when I saw him for the first and last time. But I thought it a shrewd move on my part to profess that I was acquainted with him for a long time, and I was quite proud of my diplomatic acuteness. Then I retired majestically, leaving my aunt to make Suzon the confidant of her woes.

CHAPTER IV.

WAR was declared, and, from that time on, there was a stand-up fight between me and Madame de Lavalley. Formerly I dared hardly open my mouth in her presence, except when the curé was there to see something like fair play. She used to make me hold my tongue, even before I had finished what I had to say.

Now, this way of acting wounded my feelings to a painful degree, for my tongue runs quick. My talks with the curé made some amends for this enforced taciturnity, but fell far short of what I needed; so I had got into the habit of speaking aloud with myself. I sometimes stood before my glass for hours,

and kept up a dialogue with my reflection the whole time.

Dear mirror! Faithful friend! Sole confidant of my most secret thoughts!

I know not whether people have ever given any serious thought to the enormous influence exercised by this little article on the mind. And take notice that I do not qualify the sex of the aforesaid mind, knowing as I do full well that bearded individuals find quite as great a pleasure in contemplating their external characteristics as we do.

If I were ever to write a philosophical work I would discuss this question: "The influence of the looking-glass on the intellect and heart of man."

I do not deny that my treatise would be, perhaps, unique in its way, and would not bear the slightest resemblance to those philosophical systems in which Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and others have floundered throughout their entire lives, to their own exceeding glory and the very great happiness of posterity, whose pleasure in reading them is only the greater from its profound inability to comprehend a word they have written. No, I should never dream of encroaching on the preserves of these gentlemen. My treatise

would be plain, clear, and practical, with a slight flavor of sarcasm, and to insist that the above-mentioned philosophers have any claim to these qualities would be to carry the spirit of contradiction very far indeed. But as I have not been able to discover that my understanding was sufficiently ripened for such an important work I find full compensation in the sincere affection I feel for my mirror, and in the grateful sentiment that induces me to remain a very long time before it every day.

I know well that some of those morose, tiresome people who are always viewing everything with jaundiced eyes are sure to accept this confession of mine as proof positive that coquetry is the chief element in the sentiment I profess to feel in presence of my mirror. Good heavens, nobody is perfect! And confess, my fine gentleman, that, if you be sincere, a thing by no means certain, you are bound to acknowledge personal interest, not to use a coarser term, to be the controlling element in most of *your* sentiments.

But to return to my subject, I will say that, as my terror of my aunt was now a thing of the past, I no longer tried to check my flow

of words in her presence. At every meal there were disputes that threatened to degenerate into storms.

Although, so far, I knew nothing of her origin it did not take me long to find out that she was as stupid as an owl, and that she was completely baffled when I based my opinions on my own knowledge or my curé's. Besides, I never felt the slightest hesitation in coolly asserting as historical facts ideas that were simply the creation of my own brain. Unfortunately, when the discussion turned on subjects within my aunt's personal experience I had to surrender; when she declared that things happened in such or such a way in the world, or that men were rascals of the deepest dye, limbs of the devil, I lost my temper, but I had nothing to say in reply. I had sense enough to understand that the persons among whom I lived could give me only a very imperfect idea of the conduct of men and women in the ordinary affairs of life.

The curé dined with us every Sunday. He had, I presume, his own reasons for declining to indulge in eulogies on the lords of creation before me, — except his ancient heroes, whose enterprising activity could no longer harm him, were under consideration, — for his disclaimers

of my aunt's assertions were as feeble as can well be imagined.

The Sunday dinner invariably consisted of a capon or chicken, a salad *aux œufs durs*, and clotted cream in season. The curé, whose fare was of the poorest at home, and whose palate had a sterling appreciation of Suzon's cooking, arrived as hungry as a hunter, and rubbing his hands in pleasant anticipation.

We were soon at table, and the beginning of the conversation resembled the bill of fare somewhat in its sameness.

"We have fine weather," said my aunt, who simply changed the adjective if it rained.

"Glorious weather!" answered the curé joyously; "walking in this lovely sunshine is enchanting!"

Whether it rained, or snowed, or froze, after a shower of hail or brimstone, the curé would have expressed his satisfaction all the same; he would have sung the comforts of a room well protected against draughts, or the cheeriness of a blazing fire.

"Still, it is not warm," returned my aunt. "This is really astonishing. In my time we wore white gowns at Easter."

"Did white dresses become you?" I asked sharply.

My aunt, who was on the watch for some impertinence, tried to crush me with an ominous glance before replying.

"Certainly, very much so."

"Indeed?" I exclaimed, in a tone that left no doubt as to my opinion on the subject.

"In my time," observed my aunt, "young girls never spoke except they were spoken to."

"Then you never used to speak in your youth, aunt?"

"When I was spoken to, not otherwise."

"And every other young girl acted as you did?"

"Certainly, niece."

"What a hateful time it must have been!" I sighed, raising my eyes to Heaven.

The curé looked at me reproachfully, and the eyes of Madame de Lavalley wandered round the different objects on the table, evidently tempted to hurl one of them at my head.

When the conversation had reached this degree of acrimony it suddenly dropped, until the bitter feelings of my aunt, repressed for a time by her will power, suddenly burst forth like an engine subjected to over-pressure. She poured out the phials of her

wrath on all creation. Men, women, children, nothing escaped it. As for the poor men, all that was left of them at the end of the dinner was mangled flesh and bones; she had turned them into nondescript monsters.

"Men are not worth a rap," said my aunt, in her customary chaste and elegant language.

The curé, under the weight of the distressing certainty that he was not a woman, bent his head, seemingly full of contrition.

"The miscreants! The wretches!" continued my aunt, with a furious look in my direction, as if I might belong to the species in question.

"Hum!" was the curé's answer.

"People who think of nothing but jollification and eating," went on my aunt, who still owed her husband a grudge on account of the poverty in which he had left her.

"Hum, hum!" returned the curé, shaking his head.

"M. le Curé," I cried impatiently, "hum, hum! is no very strong argument."

"Pray excuse me," answered the good man, who would have liked to be let enjoy his dinner in peace. "I fancy Madame de Lavallo goes a little farther than she intends in using the expression 'limbs of the devil.'"

But, assuredly, there are many men in whom we can place no great confidence."

"You are like Francis I.; you prefer the women, then?" said I, in my candid way.

"*Palsambleu!*" shouted my aunt, who was in the habit of using this expression, borrowed from her husband, in place of far more forcible words, thinking it quite aristocratic; "*palsambleu!* will you hold your tongue, you idiot?"

But the curé made her a mysterious sign, and the worthy woman bit her lips.

"And what about your heroes, M. le Curé? and your Greeks? and your Romans?"

"Oh, the resemblance between the men of to-day and those of yore is very slight," said the curé, quite convinced that he was expressing a great truth.

"And the curés?" I retorted.

"Oh, the curés are not before the court," he answered, with his winning smile.

This kind of conversation, with its hidden meanings, excited my curiosity to an enormously irritating degree. I was conscious that a whole world of ideas and sentiments, which I should not make any delay in discovering, was shut out from me. I had my doubts as to the absolute correctness of my aunt's

opinions on the human race, but I knew I was ignorant of many things and in danger of remaining at a standstill in my ignorance for a long time.

One morning, while I was meditating on this lamentable situation, the idea came into my head of consulting the three persons whom I was in the habit of meeting every day: Jean, the farmer, Perrine, and Suzon.

As the latter had lived at C—I concluded that her verdict on the subject must be based on great experience, so I kept her in reserve to clinch the question.

Wrapping a capulet¹ about me, I put on my sabots and made my way to the farm, which was nearly the two-thirds of a mile from the house.

After splashing, floundering, and sinking in the mire, I came upon Jean, who was cleaning his plough.

“Good day, Jean.”

“And the same to you, ma’m’selle,” said Jean, doffing his woollen cap, which action allowed his hair to bristle straight up on his head, a little exercise to which it was addicted when freed from a pressure of any kind whatever.

¹ Mantilla worn by women in the Upper Pyrenees. — Tr,

"I have come to consult you on a *very* important matter," dwelling on the adverb with impressive emphasis, to waken up his understanding, which I knew to be rather inclined to go vagabondizing when any one happened to question him.

"At your service, ma'm'selle."

"My aunt says that all men are miscreants. What is your opinion on the subject, Jean?"

"Miscreants?" repeated Jean, who opened his eyes to their widest, as if he saw a monster before him.

"Yes, that is the opinion of my aunt, and I wish to have yours."

"Sure enough, I don't deny that might be so."

"But that is not an opinion, Jean, now, is it? Come, now, do you believe — yes or no — that men are, generally, miscreants?"

Jean rested the tip of his nose on the index finger of his right hand, a well-known sign of deep meditation.

After reflecting for at least a full minute he gave this clear and decisive answer:

"Listen, ma'm'selle, I'm going to make it plain to you. What you say might be so, and, then, it might n't be so, either."

“You idiot!” said I, indignant at such phenomenal stupidity.

He opened his eyes, he opened his mouth, he opened his hands, he would have opened his entire person if he could, in order to show forth the overwhelming nature of his amazement.

I returned to the courtyard of Le Buisson, in a fuming rage with the mire, with my sabots, with Jean, and with myself.

“Perrine,” I cried, “come here!”

Perrine, who happened to be cleaning the earthen pans of her dairy, ran up at once, a bunch of nettles in her hand, her arms bare, her face as red as the ruddiest of apples, and her hat hanging over her shoulders as usual.

“What is your opinion of men?” I said bluntly.

“Of me-e-n” —

And Perrine, whose face changed from apple-red to the hue of a peony, dropped her nettles, took up a corner of her apron, raised her left leg, balanced herself on her right, and stared at me with an air of utter bewilderment.

“Why don’t you answer, I say? What is your opinion of men?”

“Ma’m’selle, you’re making game of me, for sure!”

“No, no, I’m speaking very seriously. Answer at once.”

“Faith, then, ma’m’selle,” said Perrine, coming plump down on her two legs again, “my opinion is that you might see worse things than a tight, bonny lad!”

This point of view plunged me in the profoundest reflection.

“I am not speaking of their physical qualities. I have reference to their moral qualities,” I resumed, shrugging my shoulders.

“Faith, ma’m’selle,” answered Perrine, whose little eyes shone, “I think them too sweet for anything!”

“What! you do not regard them as miscreants, wretches, limbs of the devil?”

Perrine roared with laughter.

“Excuse me, ma’m’selle, but calling them miscreants is so funny I” —

Here she stopped and gave her head a terrible blow with her fist. Then she fumbled with her apron, cast down her eyes, and seemed disposed to take to her heels.

“Well, go on, can’t you? What next?”

“Ma’m’selle, you’re trying to make me talk nonsense, for sure! I’m off.”

And making me her finest courtesy, she vanished into the depths of the dairy and shut the door in my face.

“What did she mean by making her talk nonsense? Well, Suzon is the only resource left me now. Wonder if I can get anything out of her.”

I entered the kitchen. Suzon, armed with a broom, was preparing to bring its agency into play effectively. It looked to me as if she was in one of her tantrums, and I deemed it prudent to prepare the way by some rhetorical expedients before approaching the question.

“What a handsome appearance your coppers have, and how they do shine!” said I graciously.

“A body can only do what she can,” grumbled Suzon, “and those who find fault with them may say their say for what I care.”

“Do you know, Suzon, your last chicken fricassee was delicious,” I went on, keeping up my courage, “you must really show me how to make it.”

“That’s none of your business, mademoiselle; please go to your own place and don’t interfere with my kitchen.”

These methods of corruption producing

no effect, I turned my batteries on another point.

“Do you know what has come into my head, Suzon? You must have been very pretty in your young days,” said I, thinking to myself that had I been her husband I should have been capable of baking her in the oven, so I might get rid of her.

I had touched a sensitive chord. Suzon deigned to smile.

“Every one has had her day, some time or other, mademoiselle.”

“Suzon,” I said, taking advantage of this sudden gentleness to arrive at my aim as speedily as possible, “I want to ask you a question. What is your opinion of men — and of women?” I added, thinking it diplomatic to extend my investigations to both sexes.

Suzon leaned on her broom, assumed her most crabbed air, and answered with a positiveness that was simply overpowering:

“The women, mademoiselle, are no great shakes, but the men are as bad as bad can be.”

“Oh!” I protested, “are you quite sure of it?”

“It’s as sure as that I’m talking to you this present moment, mademoiselle!”

She rushed with her broom at the remnants

of vegetables strewed over the floor and swept them away with as much fierce dexterity as if they represented those bipeds that were the objects of her antipathy.

I withdrew to my room to meditate on the misanthropic axiom enunciated by Suzon, rather discouraged when I came to think I myself was "no great shakes," and that my unknown friends the men were in a still more humiliating case, being "as bad as bad can be."

CHAPTER V.

STILL, as my moral investigations seemed to have been followed by very unsatisfactory results, I decided, in pursuing them further, to call the romances in the library to my aid.

There being a fair at C— on a certain Monday, my aunt, the curé, and Suzon had made up their minds to go there in company. As usual, my aunt decided to leave me at home under the guardianship of Perrine, and for the first time in my life this decision of hers enchanted me. I was sure to be my own mistress, for Perrine would trouble her head

more about her cow than about my cravings for fuller knowledge.

When an excursion of this kind was in question our farmer drove into the yard, at eight in the morning, a sort of carryall, called in the country a *maringote* ; my aunt made her appearance in gorgeous array, her head adorned with a round hat of black felt tied with ribbons of pale violet, and planted arrogantly on the top of her chignon. She was swathed in furs, having since her marriage acted on the principle that a lady of rank should never be seen abroad without the skin of some animal or other on her back. She believed firmly, when she was dressed in this fashion, that all the blemishes which threw her origin in her teeth were wiped out.

She sat on a pillow resting on a chair at the back of the carryall. Suzon, to whom was entrusted the task of making the horse go, though he was really determined to go it alone, was perched on the plank in front, and the curé beside her, on the left.

Then, with one accord, they all turned toward me.

“Don’t be playing any of your pranks,” said my aunt, “and be sure not to go into the kitchen garden.”

“Don’t turn my kitchen topsy-turvy,” cried Suzon; “and make your lunch off the cold veal.”

The curé did not breathe a word, but looked at me with a friendly smile, making a gesture which meant

“If she had let me, you may be certain I should have taken you, too.”

On that memorable Sunday things passed as usual. I walked a few steps on the highway, and soon the three of them vanished out of sight.

Without losing a moment I set about executing a plan that had been ripening for a long time, and that was to get possession of the library; the curé, it is true, had, unfortunately, taken it into his head to confiscate the key, but I was not the girl to let a little thing like that bother me.

I ran for a ladder and dragged it under the window of the library; after superhuman efforts I raised it at last, and propped it against the wall. Climbing up nimbly, with a stone in my hand I broke a pane, removed the broken glass from the sash, squeezed my head and shoulders through, and dropped, or rather fell, headforemost on the tiled floor, bruising my forehead awfully; the

curé brought me a salve the next day to heal it.

My chief concern now, when I got up and was somewhat recovered from the dizziness occasioned by my fall, was to search in the drawers of an old bureau and try to find a key like the one the curé had appropriated. My task did not take long: after two or three fruitless trials I found what I wanted.

After removing, as far as possible, the traces of my burglarious enterprise I sank into an arm-chair, and, while resting from my labors, my eyes caught the titles of the works of Sir Walter Scott just in front of me. I seized one of them at random, and returned to my room, with "The Fair Maid of Perth" in my possession.

A treasure indeed! I had never read a novel before in my life, and the delight, the ecstasy the reading of this one aroused in me are simply indescribable. Though I lived nine hundred and sixty-nine years, like our old friend Methuselah, I could never forget the impression then made on me by "The Fair Maid of Perth."

I felt like some prisoner suddenly transported from his dungeon and set down in the midst of flowers and trees and sunlight;

or, better still, like an artist hearing for the first time the ideal execution of the work of his heart and intellect by a master-hand. That world to which I was a stranger, that world for which I had unconsciously yearned, stood suddenly revealed before me. A flash of light illumined my mind, and with such quickness that I believed I must, until this moment, have been silly and stupid. This romance, so full of color, life, and movement, entranced, intoxicated me.

In the evening I came down in a kind of dream to the dining-room, where the curé, who was dining with us, was waiting impatiently for me.

He looked at my face with the greatest concern, and asked with compassionate interest how the accident had happened.

"An accident?" said I, with an air of astonishment.

"Your forehead is quite black, my poor little Reine."

"The silly girl must have been climbing a tree or a ladder," said my aunt.

"A ladder, yes; that's true enough."

"Poor child!" exclaimed the curé, aghast. "Did you fall on your head?"

I made a sign of assent.

“And did you use arnica, my child?”

“Pshaw! It’s well worth while, indeed! Eat your soup, M. le Curé; don’t pay attention to that madcap; she has got what she deserved.”

The curé said nothing more. He made a little friendly sign, and looked askant at me now and then.

But little did I heed what was passing around me. I was musing on the charming Catherine Glover or on the valiant Henry Smith, with whom, for want of a better, I was already in love, and then, without the slightest reason, I burst into a passionate fit of sobbing.

“Good heavens!” cried the curé, leaping from his chair; “my dear little Reine, my poor child!”

“Let her alone,” said my aunt, “she is in one of her tempers because we did not take her with us to C—.”

But the curé, who knew how I detested weeping, and that I was too proud, in any case, to expose in presence of my aunt the suffering of which she might be the occasion, drew near me, asked in a low voice why I cried, and used all his efforts to soothe me.

“My dear, kind curé,” said I, wiping away

the tears and trying to laugh, "it's nothing. You know I have a perfect dread of pain — and then, I must look like a scarecrow!"

"Not more so than usual," rejoined my aunt.

The curé gazed at me long and anxiously. My explanation did not satisfy him, and he was saying to himself that something out of the way must have happened during the day. He advised me to go to bed immediately, which I did very promptly.

I felt humiliated at the thought of being the actor in such an emotional scene, and the more so that I had no idea of the cause of my tears. Was it pleasure? Was it pain? I could not tell, and I fell asleep, after repeatedly saying to myself it was useless attempting to analyze my feelings.

During the following month I devoured most of Sir Walter Scott's romances. Most assuredly, since that day my life has often had its share of profound and solid happiness; but, great though that happiness has been, I am not quite certain that it has surpassed, in a high degree, the keen enjoyment I experienced when my soul issued forth from the fog that held it a prisoner, like a butterfly escaped from its chrysalis, and swept along

from transport to transport, from ecstasy to ecstasy. I forgot everything, and all my thoughts were centred on my romances and on the characters that excited my imagination.

While the curé was expounding a problem I was thinking of Rebecca, whom I had left alone with the Templar; while he was lecturing on history a train of charming heroes was defiling before my eyes, and among them my fickle heart had already chosen more than half a score of husbands; while he was taking me to task I was only half listening, being busy in devising a costume like Elizabeth of England's or Amy Robsart's.

"What have you done to-day?" he asked on entering.

"Nothing."

"Nothing? What do you mean?"

"Oh, this sort of thing bores me!" I answered wearily.

The poor curé was horror-struck. He prepared long lectures, which he delivered for my benefit without pause or rest; but he might as well have been talking to a red Indian for all the effect they produced on me.

At length, and all of a sudden, I fell into

low spirits. Though my aunt no longer beat me, she made up for it by the rude things she said to me. She had guessed that the idea of being so small was a torture to me; and so she lost no opportunity of wounding my feelings where they were most vulnerable: she called me an abortion, and never grew tired of repeating that I was ugly.

A short time before I had regarded myself as very pretty, and had a good deal more confidence in my own opinion than in that of my aunt. But since I had become acquainted with the heroines of Sir Walter Scott I was completely at fault, and no longer had the same certainty. They were so beautiful; and it was agony to think that the only chance one had of being loved was to be like them.

The curé, on account, I suppose, of the sympathy by which we were unconsciously united, lost his smiles, and his color with them. He looked at me despairingly, passed the time in taking snuff, and apparently had quite forgotten how to do so artistically. He did his best to spy out my secret, employing the most artful schemes for the purpose. However, I was impenetrable.

One day I saw him making for the library,

but I always took good care never to leave the key in the lock. He turned back, shaking his head and running his fingers through his hair, which, being in greater disorder than ever, was now standing up like a plume.

I had hidden behind a door, and, when he was passing close by me, I heard him murmur:

“I will return with the key!”

This intention of his alarmed me exceedingly. I was sure he would discover my secret, and then—good-by to my darling Sir Walter!

I ran at once and gathered together several romances, took them to my room, and replaced them on the shelves by volumes from any spot where I could find them; but, with all my precautions, I feared the sheet of paper I had substituted for the broken pane was a witness it would be vain to attempt to gainsay.

It was on that day I discovered, while examining some letters I found in the bureau, the class of people my aunt had sprung from. It was a good weapon, and I decided I should not be slow in using it, either.

The next day, at lunch, she was in a very bad temper. When she was in this vein, if

she did not find a pretext for scolding me she was sure to do without it.

I was dreaming of that fascinating Buckingham, who seemed to my eyes simply adorable, with his insolence, his splendid garb, his knots of ribbon, and his wit, and I was asking myself why Alice Bridgenorth was so terrified at finding herself in his company, when my aunt said, without any preface :

“What a fright you are this morning, Reine !”

I jumped up on my chair.

“There !” said I, passing her the salt-cellar.

“I did not ask for the salt, you goose ! Really, you are getting to be as stupid as you are ugly.”

I may mention, by the way, that my aunt never said “thou” to me. Ever since the day she married my uncle she had got it into her head that her aristocratic station required the erasure of the “thou” from her vocabulary. She said “you” even to her rabbits.

“I do not agree with you,” I said dryly. “I am sure I am very pretty.”

“A capital joke, that !” cried my aunt. “You pretty ! A little abortion, no higher than the mantelpiece !”

"Better look like a delicate plant than like a caricature of a man," I retorted.

My aunt firmly believed she had been at one time a beauty. It was a point about which she allowed no trifling.

"I have been beautiful, mademoiselle, so beautiful that the people of the country used to call my sister and myself goddesses."

"Did your sister resemble you, aunt?"

"Very much so; we were twins."

"Her husband must have been the object of sincere compassion," I said with impressive assurance.

My aunt rapped out an oath which I cannot allow my pen to repeat.

"I am not surprised," I continued calmly; "you have, naturally, the manners of women of your class, while I" —

But I stuck fast in the middle of the sentence. My aunt had broken a plate with the handle of her knife. My words proved to her how unavailing were all her efforts to hide her birth. I was now fully avenged for all her malignity.

"You are a serpent!" she cried in a stifled voice.

"I don't believe it, aunt."

"A serpent!"

"You said so before," I answered, tranquilly swallowing my last strawberry.

"A serpent I have warmed in my bosom," repeated my aunt, too angry to care for originality.

I shook my head, thinking, if I were a serpent even, the position would have no attraction for me, and answered:

"Do me the honor, madame, of permitting me to state that I have studied this animal in my natural history, and have never been able to discover that one of its habits was to be warmed in the bosom of any person whatsoever."

My aunt, always brought to a standstill when I alluded to my studies, did not answer, but there was a look on her face the reverse of reassuring, and I slipped away, singing at the top of my voice:

"I once had an uncle who was called De Pavol,
De Pavol, vol, vol, De Pavol!"

We were now in the middle of June. Butterflies were flitting and flies were buzzing everywhere around me. The air was laden with a thousand perfumes, and, in short, it was such a ravishing day that I forgot my customary prudence. Taking my book along

with me, I went and threw myself down in a meadow on the shady side of a haystack.

I felt just a little inclined to cry when I called to mind the words of my aunt. Certainly it was heartrending to be so small, so awfully small ! Was it possible that any one should ever love me ? But "Peveril of the Peak" was a great comfort to me. Of all the romances of Walter Scott it was the one I favored most, and all on account of Fenella, who must assuredly have been a tinier creature than even I am.

I loved, adored Buckingham. I was quite angry with Fenella ; the words she used in addressing him were shockingly rude, and at the moment when she is vanishing through the window I paused in my reading to exclaim :

" Stupid little thing ! and he such a charming man ! "

Then I raised my eyes and gave a cry of dismay. The curé was standing straight in front of me ! His arms were folded, and he was gazing down on me with an air of consternation, apparently as much appalled by what he saw as the person in the fairy tale who discovered that his diamonds had been changed into nuts.

I rose up, somewhat abashed, for I had tricked him shamefully.

“Oh ! Reine ” — he began.

“My dear curé,” I cried, clasping “Peveril of the Peak” to my heart, “I entreat, I beseech you let me finish it!”

“Reine, Reine, my little Reine, I could never have thought this of you !”

His gentleness moved me strongly, especially as my conscience was anything but easy, but, employing a stratagem distinctively feminine, I hastened to change the subject.

“It took me out of myself, M. le Curé, for I am very unhappy.”

“Unhappy, Reine ? ”

“Do you think it can be very pleasant for any one to have an aunt like mine ? It is true she no longer beats me, but she says things that stab me to the heart.”

How well I knew my curé ! The wrong I had done him and his intended sermon were at once forgotten, especially as there was a good deal of truth in my words.

“And this is why you are so sad, my dear little child ? ”

“Certainly, M. le Curé. Just only think of it ! Always dinning into my ear, from

morning to night, that I am an abortion, and ugly as a scarecrow !”

The tears came to my eyes, for the thought of my sufferings made my heart bleed.

The good curé, deeply affected, rubbed his nose, looking rather put out. He was far from sharing the opinion of my aunt on the subject, and he was searching for some way of relieving me from my affliction without, at the same time, enkindling the sins of pride, vanity, and other elements of damnation in my soul.

“Now, Reine, really, it is wrong to attach too much importance to things that fade away so soon !”

“However, these things exist at present,” I answered, chiming in, after two centuries, with the thought of the most beautiful woman in France.

“And then you may meet people, perhaps, who will not be quite of the same mind as Madame de Lavalley.”

“And are you one of these people, M. le Curé? Now, do you think me pretty?”

“Well — yes,” answered the curé piteously.

“And very pretty?”

“Well — yes,” still more piteously.

“Oh, am n’t I pleased !” I cried, whirling

round on my heel. "How I do love you, my curé!"

"That's all very fine, Reine, but you have committed a great fault. You made your way into the library at the risk of breaking your neck, and read books I should have, probably, forbidden you to read."

"Walter Scott, M. le Curé? Walter Scott? And my history of literature speaks so well of him!"

And I gave him a full account of all my impressions. My tongue ran fast and furious, for I was enchanted to find that not only did the curé forget to scold me, but was listening to me with the greatest interest. My high spirits had a magical effect on him; the color suddenly came back to his cheeks and the smile to his lips.

"It's all right, Reine," said he; "you may go on with Sir Walter; I intend taking him up again myself, so that I may be able to talk with you about him; but promise that this will be the last of your pranks."

I made the required promise with the utmost sincerity, and, from that time on, we had fresh material for disputes and discussions, for you can easily understand we were never of the same opinion.

But the interest I was taking in my romances was soon effaced by an astounding, unheard-of event that happened a few weeks later at Le Buisson — one of those events that do not, indeed, make empires totter on their foundations, but that thrill the hearts and imaginations of young girls with convulsive emotions.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was on a Sunday.

On Sunday we attended high mass regularly, it being the only mass said during the morning, as the parish was without a curate. My aunt was the first to enter our emblazoned pew, I followed after, then came Suzon, with Perrine in her wake.

Our little church was a very old and a very dilapidated structure. The primitive color of the walls was giving way to a greenish, slimy tint, caused by the moistness of the atmosphere. Even the floor was not level, and a number of crevices and little mounds invited the faithful to break their necks and so take advantage of their presence in a sanctified

place to mount to heaven the sooner. The altar was adorned with figures of angels painted by the village wheelwright, who gloried in being an artist; two or three saints contemplated one another with surprise, astonished at their common ugliness. I have many a time said to myself, after regarding them, that if I were a saint, and if mortals dared to make me out so hideous, I would be absolutely deaf to their prayers; but perhaps the saints have not the same cast of mind that I have. A white rose had passed its perfumed head through a window, now bereft of its panes, and, by its beauty and freshness, seemed to protest against the bad taste of man.

We possessed a harmonium whose notes usually had only three vibrations; sometimes the number rose to five, this instrument being, thanks to the temperature, subject to vagaries, like the rheumatism of our choirmaster, who roared for two hours, and whose belief in the excellence of his voice was so deep and artless that it was impossible to get angry with him. The celebrant's bench was placed behind a kind of precipice, so that, from where I sat, I saw only the head and bust of the curé, who looked as if he were doing penance. The young choristers

made faces and whispered behind his back, which did not appear to annoy him.

After the Gospel he took off his chasuble and stole in our presence, — it didn't matter, we were all one family, — stumbled into some of the holes, and finally reached the pulpit.

Among the men and women who fret their little hour on this globe of ours there is not one, I imagine, who, during the course of his or her existence, has not had some dream or other. The human animal, be its position high or low, cannot live without ambitions, and the curé, being subject to this common law, had for thirty years of his life dreamed of possessing a pulpit.

Unluckily, he was very poor, his parishioners were as poor as he, and my aunt, the only person in a position to help him, gave no answer to his timid suggestions. Apart from the fact that her miserly nature was always up in arms when her pocket was in danger, she did not set the slightest store on this dream of her neighbor.

At last, as the result of the severest economy, the curé was the proud possessor of two hundred francs. He thereupon resolved to realize his dream, even though the result might not come up to his expectations.

One morning he arrived at the house, out of breath.

“Reine, Reine, come with me!” he cried.

“And pray where, M. le Curé?”

“To the church; come quick!”

“But mass is finished.”

“Yes, yes, but I want to show you something that will delight you!”

He looked so joyous, his honest face beamed with such gladness, that I still laugh when I recall the scene, and his rapture on the occasion is one of the pleasantest memories of that period in my life.

He did not walk, he flew, and we raced the whole way to the church. The pulpit had just been placed in position, and the curé, falling into an ecstasy before it, whispered:

“Look, my dear, look! Was n’t it a lucky idea? We possess a pulpit at last! It may not appear very solid, but it holds together very well for all that. And now the dream of my life is realized! We ought never to despair of anything, my dear, never!”

I did look, and I confess I was somewhat bewildered. A pulpit, in my imagination, was always something grand and monumental. What I saw before me was a white wooden box placed on iron supports so low that the

steps were not really needed at all. But — who ever heard of a pulpit without steps? So, to save appearances, there were two, each about half a foot high.

‘ See, Reine,” said the curé “ what a good effect it produces ! When I get a little money I shall have it painted. No, I ’ll paint it myself ; it will be an amusement, and a saving as well. I don’t deny but that it might have been a little more elevated, but it is not right to be too ambitious.”

And the excellent man marched around the pulpit with an air of intense admiration. He could not have felt happier if the panels had been painted by Raphael or carved by Michel-Angelo.

He had not the slightest idea of the little resemblance between the reality and the dream — always the case, alas ! He took good heed not to make comparisons, and so there was nothing to hinder him from enjoying his happiness to the top of his bent.

“ And I drew up the plan of it myself, my dear child, and really, I think I did it rather well ! But there is another side to the picture, and I must confess that I have got a little in debt ; the price asked was higher than I expected ; however, apparently, that is

always the case when we set about having anything constructed. I reckoned on buying a wadded overcoat this winter. Well, all I have to say is that I must do without it!"

Ah, well have I said that his rapture on this occasion is one of the pleasantest memories of my life then! Never since have I seen a man so happy, or one who could so increase the value of so very modest a piece of good fortune by the reflection of his own fine nature and childlike disposition.

"It has quite the air of a pulpit, has n't it?" he cried, laughing, and rubbing his hands.

I had a good deal of doubt on the subject, but I managed to hide it, and fell into raptures also, as successfully as I could, before this extraordinary object, which, because of the irregular form of the church, was thrust back into a corner, so that, when the curé preached, three-fourths of the congregation could see only an arm and a lock of white hair moving in eloquent agitation, according to the different phases of the subject.

The curé was so delighted at being able to say to himself: "I am now going to ascend the pulpit!" that we had to resign ourselves to hearing a sermon every Sunday.

As soon as he opened his mouth all the

good women settled themselves down comfortably to enjoy a little nap. Perrine profited by the general drowsiness to flash a glance, now and then, into the pew next ours; and Reine de Lavallo got ready to meditate on the vicissitudes of life as represented by an aunt, and on the weariness produced by sermons.

I do not know why the curé loved to discourse on the human passions; but one day, after he had let himself be dragged along by the warmth of his improvisation, I put so many indiscreet and embarrassing questions to him at dinner that he made a firm resolve never to approach certain subjects when I was present. After that he was satisfied to confine his preaching to idleness, drunkenness, anger, and other vices which had not the slightest interest for me, and about which I felt no inclination to ask questions.

He would spend a full hour in picturing for our benefit the awful iniquity in which we were plunged; then, when our moral condition had become truly lamentable, he descended, with a radiant air, into hell, taking us along with him, and brought us to within a hair's breadth of the tortures our sinful souls deserved. After this he worked his way boldly to a more comfortable view of our

situation, emerged gradually from the infernal regions, stayed just for about a minute on earth, calmly lodged us at last in heaven, and came down from the pulpit with the triumphant mien of a conqueror who has just cut the Gordian knot.

His hearers thereupon woke up with a start, all except Suzon, whose satisfaction at hearing the human race abused banished sleep, and who was sipping a cup of coffee while her pastor was scourging his flock with the flowers of his rhetoric.

It was, then, on a Sunday.

The heat was oppressive, and on our return Suzon said :

“ We ’ll have a storm before evening.”

This prophecy pleased me ; a storm was a happy break in the monotony of my life, and, despite my cowardice, I was fond of thunder and lightning, though I shook like an aspen during a quick succession of thunderclaps.

During the early afternoon I wandered like a lost soul about the garden and the little wood. I felt bored to death, thinking sadly that no out-of-the-way event was ever likely to turn up, as far as I was concerned, and that I should have to live with my aunt forever.

About four I returned, went up to the cor-

ridor on the first floor, and, with my face glued to a pane in one of the windows, amused myself by watching the motion of the clouds which were gathering above Le Buisson and heralding the storm predicted by Suzon.

I was asking myself where they came from, what had they seen on their journey, and what were they able to tell a young girl who knew nothing of life, nothing of the world, and who yet aspired both to see and to know. They had met behind yonder horizon which I had never overstepped, and which hid from my gaze those mysteries, those splendors (so, at least, I fancied), those joys and pleasures upon which I was silently meditating.

I was disturbed in my reflections by suddenly catching sight of Perrine. She was hidden in a little corner, and a big clodhopper of a fellow was kissing her, with his arm round her waist, apparently not meeting much resistance on her part. I quickly opened the window, shouting:

“Very well, mademoiselle; I see you!”

Perrine at once seized her sabots and fled, panic-stricken, to the stable. The big clodhopper doffed his cap and gazed at me with a fatuous smile that opened his mouth from ear to ear.

I was indulging in peals of laughter, when a light carriage, whose approach I had not noticed, entered the courtyard, a man leaped to the ground, said a few words to the servant who was with him, and looked round in search of some one to speak to.

But Perrine, whose hat I could see bulging out through the grated window of the stable, did not budge, and her lover had thrown himself flat on the ground behind a straw rick.

As for myself I was astounded at the spectacle, and, pushing back the blind, I observed what was going on in perfect stillness.

With two strides over the dilapidated flight of steps, the stranger was at the door and looking round for a bell which had never existed, which seeing, and patience evidently not being his strong point, he hammered away at the door with his fist.

In a moment my aunt and Suzon stood before him, and I solemnly declare that, from that moment, I had the highest opinion of his courage ; he did not manifest the slightest alarm ! He bowed slightly, and, as far as I could make out from his gestures, requested permission to take shelter in Le Buisson, saying that the threatening appearance of the sky had made him anxious.

And, in fact, at that very moment the storm came down furiously ; there was barely time to put the horse and carriage under cover.

It is said that solitude produces timidity ; but, in certain cases, it produces the exact opposite. As I had never associated with anybody and, consequently, had no standard of comparison, my self-confidence was extreme ; I was entirely ignorant of that strange feeling which annihilates the most brilliant faculties and makes the most superior man look like a fool.

Still, my heart was beating rapidly in presence of an adventure that had, apparently, come in answer to my thoughts, and I hesitated so long at the drawing-room door before entering that I was still there when the curé arrived, soaked to the skin and happy.

“ M. le Curé,” I cried, running up to him, “ there is a man in the drawing-room ! ”

“ Indeed ! A farmer, I suppose ? ”

“ No, no, M. le Curé, a *real* man.”

“ A real man ? What do you mean ? ”

“ I mean that he is neither a curé nor a peasant. He is young and well dressed. Oh, let us go in at once ! ”

We entered, and I was nearly crying out in

my astonishment, for there was my aunt with a most gracious expression on her countenance and a pleasant smile for the stranger, who sat facing her and seemed to be as much at ease as if he were in his own house.

But indeed, the very look of him ought to be able to mollify the most sullen temper. He was tall, just a little portly, and his countenance was frank, open, and bright. He wore his hair cut close, had a mustache, pointed at the ends, a well formed mouth, and white teeth, which his honest, natural laugh often exposed to view. His whole person was the very expression of gayety and of his joy in life.

He rose as soon as he saw us, and waited a moment for my aunt to present him. But my aunt was as little acquainted with this ceremony as are the natives of Greenland, and he presented himself as Paul de Conprat.

“De Conprat!” exclaimed the curé; “are you the son of Major de Conprat, an excellent gentleman I knew formerly?”

“My father is certainly a major, M. le Curé. Were you acquainted with him?”

“Yes, he did me a service several years ago. What a fine, honorable gentleman he was!”

"I am aware that every one is fond of my father," he said, his face growing brighter than ever; "but it always renews my pleasure when the fact is brought home to me in this way."

"Are you not," continued the curé, "a relative of M. de Pavol?"

"Most assuredly; third cousin."

"This is his niece," said the curé, presenting me.

Inexperienced though I was, I could perceive a certain amount of admiration in the look M. de Conprat gave me.

"I am enchanted to make the acquaintance of so charming a cousin," he said, in a tone of conviction, offering his hand.

This compliment sent a little thrill of pleasure through my frame, and I put my hand in his without the slightest embarrassment.

"Not precisely a cousin," said the curé, taking a pinch of snuff, with an air of great satisfaction; "M. de Pavol is Rêine's uncle only by marriage; his wife was a Damoiselle de Lavalle."

"Oh, that does not matter, I don't surrender our relationship for all that! Besides, if a careful investigation were made I have no doubt it would be discovered there were

intermarriages between our house and the De Lavalles."

We immediately began gossiping just as if we were old friends, and the idea really took hold of me that we had long known and liked each other. I experienced that unaccountable impression which makes us imagine that what is passing immediately before our eyes has had its counterpart in some immemorial past, too remote to have left aught behind it but a vague and almost obliterated memory.

It was in vain I recalled all the heroes of romance with whom I had become intimate: not a single one of them was to be compared to the hero I had just discovered. He was stout, — that was past denying, — but so good-natured and merry and witty that this physical defect was quickly transformed, in my eyes, into a transcendent merit. Even my imaginary heroes soon appeared to me to be totally devoid of charm. Despite their slim and elegant figures, they were utterly routed by this plump, honest youth, who was full of life and full of joy, and whom I mentally invested with the noblest characteristics.

Meanwhile, although the storm was not so violent, it continued raining, and as it was

near dinner-time my aunt invited Paul de Conprat to join us at table. He declared immediately that he was as hungry as a church mouse, and the eagerness with which he accepted the invitation delighted me.

I slipped away with the resolution to brave the ill temper of Suzon.

"Suzon," said I excitedly, on entering the kitchen, "M. de Conprat is dining with us. Have we a fat capon, clotted cream, strawberries, and cherries?"

"Heyday," grumbled Suzon; "what a to-do! We have what we have, and let that content you!"

"I know, Suzon; but please answer me. Do you think a capon will do?"

"It is n't a capon, mademoiselle. What would you say to a turkey? Look there!"

And Suzon proudly opened the oven and called on me to admire the biped, which she and Perrine had fattened, and which weighed at least twelve pounds. Its golden skin rose here and there, thus proving the delicacy and tenderness of the flesh beneath, and presenting a most delectable spectacle to my approving eyes.

"Bravo!" I exclaimed. "But the clotted cream, Suzon, is it a success? And is there

plenty of it? And have you given attention to the dressing of the salad?"

"I am rather in the habit, mademoiselle, of doing well what I do do. And along with that, I don't suppose this gentleman is either a prince or an emperor. He is a man just like any other, and will make a shift with whatever is given him."

"A man like any other, Suzon?" said I indignantly. "Then you can't have seen him."

"Have n't seen him, mademoiselle, indeed? Well, I should rather say I have, and heard him, too! A pretty way for a Christian to behave — battering the door of a decent house almost to pieces! After that you can set your cap at him if you like!"

I had a sharp answer on the tip of my tongue, but thought it prudent to pause. Suzon would be perfectly capable of burning the turkey to get even with me!

A few minutes after, we passed into the dining-room, and I could not help darting a despairing glance at the dirty, worn-out tapestry, now falling to pieces. Then Suzon's way of laying the table was singular, to say the least of it. Three salt-cellars occupied the place of an *épergne* in the middle of the

table; the silver was thrown here and there at haphazard; the bottles appeared to be chasing one another; while a solitary decanter was so situated that only by almost dislocating one's shoulder could a person reach a hand to it, the table being three sizes too large.

For the first time in my life I felt intuitively that all the laws of symmetry were violated by the grotesque taste of Suzon.

But M. de Conprat had one of those happy dispositions that see the best side of everything, and had, besides, the knack of making himself at home wherever he happened to be.

He gave a satisfied glance at the table, swallowed the soup, his tongue running on as fast as ever, complimented Suzon, and when the turkey made its appearance his delight found expression in a cry of admiration.

"You must confess, M. le Curé," said he, "that after all, life is a happy invention and Heraclitus was a good deal of a humbug."

We, must not make light of the philosophers," answered the curé; "you generally find something good in them."

"It is charitable of you to say so, M. le Curé. As for myself, if I were the government I should let out the madmen and put

the philosophers in their place. I should take care to clap them all together in one building, too: they would devour one another the quicker."

"Who is Heraclitus?" asked my aunt.

"A driveller, madame, who spent all his time whimpering. Good heavens! can you imagine anything more ridiculous? And it is for this his name has been handed down to posterity!"

"Perhaps," I intimated, "he had to live with an aunt, and that soured him."

M. de Conprat regarded me with a look of amazement and then burst into a roar of laughter. The curé opened wide his eyes in displeasure, but my aunt, who was grappling with the turkey, carving it with a good deal of neatness, I must confess, did not hear me.

"History has left this fact unrecorded, cousin."

"At any rate," said I, "think twice before attacking the ancients; M. le Curé will tear your eyes out."

"Ah, the rogues! Use n't they to make my blood boil! The only recollections I retain of them are the impositions after school hours I had to endure on their account."

"Allow me," said the curé, coming to the

rescue of his friends, now likely to be ruined forever in my estimation, "allow me! You cannot deny certain fine virtues, certain heroic deeds that" —

"Illusions, my dear curé, illusions!" interrupted Paul de Conprat; "they were rascals of the deepest dye! But they are dead, and so, to take the poor devils of the present day — one of whom is worth a score of them — a peg lower, people pretend to be lost in admiration of the incredible virtues of your ancients! By Jové, but isn't this turkey excellent!"

He kept on in this style with never a pause, all the time eating with an appetite and a gusto that baffle description. He was helped again and again, and after every helping his plate was cleared with such rapidity that at a certain moment my aunt, the curé, and myself held our forks suspended aloft, utterly dumfounded at the scene before us.

"You had fair notice," said he, laughing, "that I was as hungry as a church mouse, a thing that occurs, for that matter, three hundred and sixty-five times per annum."

"What a sum you must spend on your table!" cried my aunt, who had an eye only for the mercantile aspect of a question, and

was always sure to say what should be left unsaid.

"Twenty-three thousand three hundred and seventy-seven francs, madame," in a tone of the utmost seriousness.

"Im — possible!" mumbled my aunt, in a sort of stupor.

"You look perfectly happy, monsieur!" said the curé, rubbing his hands.

"Happy, M. le Curé? I should rather think so! And, frankly now, is it quite natural to be unhappy?"

"Why, yes, sometimes," answered the curé, smiling.

"Oh, pshaw! people are, most of the time, unhappy through their own fault, because they take a wrong line in life at the outset. So you see it is not misfortune that exists, it is human folly that exists."

"But the latter is a misfortune in itself," replied the curé.

"Of a rather negative character, M. le Curé, and, because my neighbor happens to be a fool, it by no means follows I should imitate him."

"You are fond of paradox, monsieur."

"No, but it drives me wild to see the lives of so many people darkened by an unhealthy

imagination. I fancy they do not eat enough — live on larks or boiled eggs — and play the mischief with their brains as well as their stomachs. I am enamored of life and think every one should find it as beautiful as I do; it has only one fault: it ends — and ends so soon ! ”

A clean sweep had now been made of everything — turkey, salad, cream; and my aunt was regarding the skeleton before her with an expression that was no longer gracious: she had reckoned on making her repast off the remains of the bird for several days still.

We were rising from table when Suzon half opened the door and, thrusting her head in, said sharply :

“ I have made coffee, shall I take it in ? ”

“ Who gave you leave to ” — my aunt was beginning.

“ Yes, yes, ” said I, interrupting her quickly. “ Bring it in at once. ”

I could have kissed her for this good turn of hers, but my aunt did not share my opinion. She left the table, evidently intending to have it out with Suzon, and we did not see her again until we were in the drawing-room.

“ That cook of yours is first-rate, cousin, ” said Paul de Conprat, sipping his coffee.

“Yes, but so surly!”

“Oh, that’s neither here nor there!”

“And, by the way, what do you think of my aunt?” I asked confidentially.

“Well — she’s a — rather majestic woman,” he returned, just a little embarrassed.

“Majestic, is it? Disagreeable, you mean, don’t you?”

“Reine!” murmured the curé.

“Then let us change the subject, M. le Curé. Still, I only wish I had my cousin’s happy disposition and so be able to see the good side of my aunt.”

“Have a little practical philosophy, my charming cousin; it is the only sure basis of happiness, and, to my thinking, the only really sensible system of philosophy going.”

“What a misfortune it is you are not my aunt! How fond we should be of each other!”

“No doubt about the latter point, you may take my word for it,” he answered, laughing. “It is a result we’d arrive at without calling in the help of philosophy. Still, if you have no objection, I should prefer to keep to my sex and be your uncle.”

“Nothing could please me better. I’m not like Francis I. — women are my aversion.”

"Indeed?" he returned with a hearty laugh. "You are acquainted with the tastes of Francis I., then?"

The curé threw up his hands in despair, but M. de Conprat met his eye with an expressive twinkle in his own that said clearly: "Don't be uneasy; I understand!"

This pantomime grated on my nerves, and I made a violent effort to get at its meaning.

"By the way, speaking of uncles, are you well acquainted with M. de Pavol?"

"Yes, my property lies within three miles of his."

"What sort of a person is his daughter?"

"I often played with her when she was a child, but for the last three or four years I have lost sight of her. She is said to be very beautiful."

"How I should like to live at Pavol," I sighed; "we could meet so often!"

"Still, it's just possible, my little cousin, you might not care for me if you knew more about me, although you can really accept my assurance that I am not at all a bad sort. Except that I have a passion for turkey and an inordinate liking for pretty women I am not aware that I have any small vices."

“A liking for pretty women? But surely that is not a fault, is it? Why, I detest ugly persons myself — my aunt, for instance. But to place a turkey on the same level as a pretty woman is hardly flattering to the pretty woman, cousin.”

“Quite correct; I confess the phrase was rather unfortunate.”

“I forgive you,” I said gayly. “And now do you think I am pretty?”

For the last two hours at least I had kept on repeating in my own mind that I must not let the opportunity slip of getting a square, authoritative opinion on a subject of such thrilling personal interest. Ever since the beginning of dinner I watched impatiently for an opportunity of putting my question. Not that I had any doubt as to the answer; but to be told you are pretty, point blank, without any beating about the bush, by something different from a curé, — oh, it would be simply too delightful!

“Pretty, cousin? why, you are bewitching! Never have I seen finer eyes or a lovelier mouth!”

“How happy you make me! and how nice men are, let my aunt say what she likes!”

“Your respected aunt does not like men?”

But that is a matter of course; she has passed the age of coquetry."

"Coquetry! they never mention it to me. Do you think it requisite to be a coquette?"

"Decidedly, cousin; in my eyes it is a great accomplishment."

"You never taught me that, M. le Curé!" I cried.

During this conversation the unhappy curé was having a foretaste of the pains of purgatory. He mopped his forehead and made a wry face over his coffee, which seemingly tasted bitter in his mouth.

"M. de Conprat is making fun of you," said he.

"Is that true, cousin?"

"Oh, by no manner of means," replied Paul de Conprat, to all appearance immensely amused. "In my opinion a woman who is not a coquette is not a woman."

"Then be sure I shall do my best to become one."

"Mademoiselle de Laval, it is about time we went to the drawing-room," said the curé, rising.

"Good!" I thought. "There's the curé angry now; and yet I'm sure I have said nothing wrong."

The rain was over, the clouds had scattered, and I proposed to Paul de Conprat to take a turn in the garden.

We went out together, without asking anybody's leave, followed by the curé, who shot glances that were almost menacing after us, and evidently thought his dear lamb on the high road to perdition.

We ran about like children in the wet grass, laughing heartily when the water trickled down our legs and ankles. We chattered and gossiped, or at least I did, relating all the incidents in my life, my little annoyances, my dreams, and my dislikes.

Was there ever such a delightful, delicious evening!

M. de Conprat climbed a cherry tree, and when he shook it all the rain collected on the leaves dropped upon me. Looking down, he cried, with his mouth full of cherries, that he had never seen anything so beautiful as the raindrops that sparkled like jewels on my lovely hair, which could never have an ornament so ideally perfect.

"And Suzon," I thought, "who said he was a man 'just like any other'! How can people be so idiotic!"

We returned to the drawing-room, in which

a blazing fire had been made to dry us, and, seated side by side, continued our conversation, which assumed a more earnest, and even a mysterious tone.

My aunt, who was struck dumb by my audacious freedom, and the gayety beaming from my face, said nothing. The curé, although enchanted to see I was enjoying myself, was, notwithstanding, so perplexed that he forgot to interfere.

Was there ever such an evening !

At last, M. de Conprat rose to depart, and we accompanied him to the courtyard.

He took an affectionate farewell of the curé, and thanked my aunt. When it was my turn he held my hand and whispered :

“I wish this evening would have never come to an end, fair cousin.”

“And I, too ! But you will return, won’t you ?”

“Most assuredly ; and I hope in a short time.”

He raised my hand to his lips, and — well, there must certainly be a very strong element of perversity in human nature — this homage was for me a pleasure so novel, so keen, so altogether perfect, that I had the highly improper idea of — good heavens !

must I confess it? — yes, I had the idea — which was not executed — of throwing my arms about his neck, and kissing him on both cheeks, in spite of my aunt, in spite of the curé, who was watching us with a vigilant eye, like some new-fangled kind of dragon, — a dragon with chubby cheeks and the kindest of hearts.

CHAPTER VII.

FOR several days after M. de Conprat left, my soul was in a state of blissful intoxication that I should find hard to describe. I experienced a multiplicity of sensations, outwardly manifested by a series of antics of every sort, especially pirouettes, this exercise having long served me as an outlet for my numerous and varied emotions.

When I had twirled round on my heel until I was tired I flung myself down on the grass, and, with my eyes riveted on the sky, touched lightly on a lot of fancies, without really thinking of anything. I was in that exquisite state of semi-consciousness, that drowsy, dreamy repose, which resembles sleep and yet is very much awake; it is one of the

sweetest memories in my past life; it is the period from which I date my passionate enthusiasm for the canopy of heaven! That canopy has ever since seemed worthy of sympathizing with my thoughts, whether they were grave or gay, lively or severe.

After giving full rein to my imagination, and letting it gallop at random through these shady and darksome byways, I checked its course, turned it once more into the light, and permitted it to dwell exclusively on — M. de Conprat. I chuckled over the recollection of his honest face, his kindly laugh, and his white teeth. I thought, wistfully, of the kiss he had imprinted on my hand, and felt tickled at the notion of having been so near kissing him on both cheeks in return. For a long time I remained absorbed in such like delectable sensations, and then I began asking myself why my heart was so tremblingly alive to all these varied emotions.

When I reached this delicate point my imagination was again overcast. My ideas grew so hazy, in fact so altogether nebulous, that, after a struggle, I abandoned the task of reducing them to anything like order, and, instead, I concentrated my thoughts on a mouth that pleased me, eyes that smiled on

me, and a face whose expression I was determined never to forget.

Still, my ideas — and what odd things ideas are! — would not leave me long in peace, and I was soon again at their mercy, was soon again straying through the same misty paths, when, suddenly, one day, as I was thinking of strengthening certain impressions of mine by comparing them with those of the heroines I fancied most, a light broke through the clouds, revealing to my eyes a point of momentous importance.

I discovered I was in love, and that love was the most delightful thing in creation. It was a discovery that thrilled me with joy. In the first place a new charm was added to my life, a charm not the less real for being just a little bit vague; and then, if I was in love, surely I must be loved in return. Since I loved M. de Conprat, because everything about him seemed to me charming, the sight of me must have troubled his heart in similar fashion, for he told me I was “bewitching.” My logic, which stood proxy for a total want of experience, did not go any further, but it formed an ample basis for my system of reasoning and made me happy.

One discovery leads to another, and it began

to dawn on me that charity had, after all, only a very slight connection with the fondness of Francis I. for women in general and the Countess Anne in particular. Moreover, love and affection must be two very different things : I simply worshipped my curé, yet I never felt the least desire to kiss him, while on the other hand, I should be nothing loath to fall on the neck of Paul de Conprat. In fine, it was very ridiculous to talk mysteriously and evasively about a thing that was so natural and so evidently exempt from even the shadow of wrong.

“But then, a curé,” I thought, “must have some very queer and mistaken ideas about love, for, as he cannot marry, he cannot love. And yet Francis I. was married, and — Oh, it’s all a puzzle ! I must have some light thrown on it.”

My mind was in such a chaos that, notwithstanding the somewhat disdainful estimate I had formed of the narrow views of my curé, I decided to have a discussion with him on this delicate question.

The poor curé was perfectly aware of my disturbed mental condition, but he had too much shrewdness and common sense to lead me to imagine that he attached any impor-

tance to what he saw : he did not care to have me make avowals that might give form and substance to impressions which were now vague and obscure. He did everything in his power to turn my mind to other objects ; and, with this view, he began to visit Le Buisson every day, prolonging the lessons indefinitely.

We were sitting by our window ; my aunt, who had been in ill health for some time, had retired to her room ; my wits were wool-gathering, as usual, and the curé was doing his best to explain a problem to me.

“M. le Curé,” said I, “can you guess what is the most entrancing thing in the whole world ?”

“What is it, Reine ?”

“Love, M. le Curé.”

“What a strange subject to talk about, my child !” cried the curé, very ill at ease.

“A subject I am thoroughly acquainted with, I assure you,” I answered, shaking my head, with an air of wisdom. “I am ever asking myself why it is you never mention a thing that is of every-day occurrence.”

“And now you see what comes from reading novels, mademoiselle : you take mere fancies for realities.”

"Oh, M. le Curé! And you knowing how wrong it is for people to say what they don't think! You are quite as well aware as I am that people *do* love each other in real life, and that nothing can be more charming."

"This is a matter with which young girls have nothing to do, Reine, and you must not speak of it."

"A matter with which young girls have nothing to do? Why, they are the persons who love and are loved!"

"What an unfortunate man I am," cried the curé, "to have to do with such a head!"

"Don't speak evil of my head, M. le Curé; I am very fond of it, especially since M. de Conprat said it was pretty."

"M. de Conprat was making fun of you, Reine. You may rest assured he looked on you as a little girl of no account at all."

"You are quite mistaken," I answered, offended, "for he kissed my hand. And do you know the idea that came into my head when he did so?"

"Well, well, let us hear it," said the curé, on thorns.

"Why, M. le Curé, I was within an inch of jumping on his neck!"

"What idiotic folly! As if a person

jumped on another person's neck when neither of them was acquainted."

"Yes, yes, I know, but he — And then, if he had happened to be a woman such a notion would never have occurred to me for a moment."

"Why so, Reine? But what nonsense you talk!"

"Oh, because" —

A few moments' silence followed this profound response, and I spent them in looking sidewise at the curé, who was moving briskly up and down, and taking pinches of snuff, to hide his agitation.

"My dear curé," said I insinuatingly, "if you were only just a little good-natured!"

"Well, what would happen then, Reine?"

"Suppose I should ask you a few little questions about matters my mind is running on?"

The curé plumped down in his arm-chair, like a man who has on a sudden come to a great resolution.

"Well, Reine, I will hear you. Better an open confession of what troubles you than have you racking your brains and turning your head with all this vague folly."

"I'm not racking my brains, M. le Curé, nor

is my head turning, either. But I am thinking a good deal about love, because " —

" Because ? "

" Oh, nothing — And, to make a beginning, will you tell why it is that, if you were to kiss my hand, I should think such a thing very ridiculous and not at all pleasant, although I love you with all my heart, while my feelings are the exact opposite when I fancy M. de Conprat doing so ? "

" What — What's that you are saying, Reine ? "

" I am saying that the idea of M. de Conprat kissing my hand is very pleasant, while the idea of you " —

" But, my child, your question is absurd, and the fancy you speak of has no meaning and is not worth worrying your head about."

" Isn't it indeed ? That is not my opinion at all. It is a subject I think on very often, and this is what I have discovered : the action of M. de Conprat pleased me because he is young and might be my husband, while you are old, and a curé can never marry."

" Go on, go on," answered the curé mechanically.

" For a person is always in love with her husband, M. le Curé, is she not ? "

“Of course, no doubt about that.”

“Now, M. le Curé, tell me, is it true that men sometimes love several women?”

“I know nothing about it,” said the curé, bristling up.

“Oh, yes, you do, M. le Curé, it is your duty. A husband consequently loves another woman besides his wife? Francis I., although married, loved the Countess Anne, did he not?”

“Francis I. was a scoundrel,” cried the curé, now thoroughly exasperated, “and that Buckingham you are so fond of was another!”

“Oh, we all have our own little peculiarities,” I retorted, “and I cannot see, for the life of me, why these two should be called scoundrels because they loved several women. Perhaps Queen Claude and Madame Buckingham were like my aunt. And then, I have made another discovery: feelings are things that cannot be controlled, and they could no more help loving than I”—

“What, Reine?”

“Oh, nothing, M. le Curé! But I am afraid I have a weakness for the kind of people you call scoundrels, for Buckingham is simply enchanting!”

“Why, my child, I have done my best to

instruct you on certain matters since you began reading Walter Scott, and it would seem as if you have not understood a word of all that I said."

"Yes, M. le Curé, I have, but then your explanations have not been very clear, and there are so many things I do not understand! It is all so strange," I went on dreamily. "And now, M. le Curé, will you tell me why love makes you angry?"

"Reine," said the curé, losing patience, "we have had enough of this. You have a way of putting questions that renders it impossible for me to answer them. Now, let me tell you very seriously that there are certain subjects which you cannot understand, and which it is not proper for you to talk about, because you are too young."

The curé placed his hat under his arm, and escaped. I ran to the threshold and shouted after him:

"You may say what you like, my dear curé, but I know all about love; there's nothing like it in the world! *Vive l'amour!*"

The next two days passed without any sign of a visit from the curé. I grew remorseful for having teased him so shamefully, and, on the morning of the third day, I took the road

to the presbytery, prepared to make him the profoundest apology I could think of. He was in the kitchen, seated before a scanty breakfast, which he was devouring with as much relish as appetite.

“M. le Curé,” said I, in a tone comparatively humble, “you are angry with me?”

“A little, my dear child. You see you never pay any attention to what I say.”

“I will never speak of love again, M. le Curé, I promise it.”

“It would be better, Reine, if you tried not to think of matters you cannot understand.”

“Oh!—not understand, indeed!” I exclaimed, taking fire at once. “I understand as well as anybody, and, in spite of all the curés on the face of the earth, I maintain that” —

“There we are again!” interrupted the curé dismally; “you have broken your promise already!”

“You are right, my dear curé; but I assure you it is a subject about which a curé knows nothing.”

“Nor Reine de Laval, either. I will give you your lesson to-day, my child.”

And so ended the most serious breach I have ever had with my curé.

However, the days slipped by and, as Paul de Conprat did not return, my nervous system was completely shaken and became so irritable as to threaten the very worst consequences. A month after my memorable adventure I lost all hope, my tranquillity with it, and this misfortune, aided by my general weariness of everything, plunged me into a dull melancholy.

This was the time when the curé had his quarrel with my aunt and found himself turned out of doors.

Seated under the drawing-room window, I heard the following conversation :

“Madame,” said the curé, “I have come to speak of Reine.”

“About what ?”

“The child has fallen into a state of languor, madame. M. de Conprat’s visit gave her glimpses of a world of which she had already learned something from the romances she has been reading. She must have amusement.”

“Amusement! And where, pray, can I get her amusement? I am too ill to go anywhere.”

“I know it, madame, and so I do not expect the amusement she needs should come from you. You must write to M. de Pavol

and ask him to receive Reine for a long visit."

"Write to M. de Pavol? Certainly not. If I did, the child would not care to return."

"That is quite possible, but it is a secondary matter, of which we shall speak afterwards. The main point is that, as she must some day or other live in society, it is, in my opinion, necessary for her to change her mode of life and become familiar with many things of which she has not the slightest idea at present."

"That is not my notion at all, M. le Curé, and Reine shall not leave the place where she is."

"But, madame," rejoined the curé, who was getting warm, "I repeat that it is absolutely necessary. Reine has fallen into melancholy; Reine's brain is very active and her mind is constantly on the stretch. I am pretty sure she fancies herself in love with M. de Conprat."

"What have I to do with that?" said my aunt, to whom the reasoning of the curé was a closed book.

"Some one has written, madame, that solitude is the devil's counsellor, and it is perfectly true, at least as far as youth is

concerned. Solitude is the very worst thing possible for Reine; a little diversion will banish from her mind what is, on the whole, little more than a childish fancy."

"What queer ideas curés have!" I thought. "To speak so lightly of so grave a matter, and think I could ever forget M. de Conprat!"

"M. le Curé," answered my aunt in her driest tones, "please mind your own business; I shall do as I wish, not as you wish."

"Madame, I love this child with my whole heart, and I have not the slightest intention of allowing her to be made miserable," replied the curé, in a tone of voice entirely new to me. "You have buried her alive here in Le Buisson, you have never done anything to make her life pleasant for her, and I am justified in saying that, but for me, she would have grown up in ignorance and dulness, like some little pale, discolored plant from which the sunlight is excluded. I repeat what I said before — you must write to M. de Pavol."

"Oh, this is going too far!" cried my aunt furiously; "am I not mistress in my own house? Leave the house, M. le Curé, and let me never see you enter it again!"

"Very well, madame, I know my duty

now, and it is plain to me at the present moment that the reason why I have not acted earlier is because the selfish pleasure I felt in so often seeing my little Reine blinded me."

I was all in tears when the curé came upon me in the avenue.

"My dear curé, can it be possible? Turned out of doors on my account! What is going to become of us if we are never to see each other any more?"

"Then you heard the dispute, my child?"

"Yes, yes; I was under the window. Oh, what a woman! what a" —

"Come, come, no excitement, Reine," answered the curé, who was himself quite flushed and trembling. "I intend writing to your uncle this very evening."

"Write, my dear curé; write at once. I want him to come for me immediately."

"Let us hope he will," replied the curé, with a smile that was kindly, and just a little sad.

But various duties prevented him from writing that evening, and, on the next day, my aunt, who had been fighting off her sickness for several weeks, fell dangerously ill. Five days later Death knocked at the door

of Le Buisson and changed the complexion of my life.

CHAPTER VIII.

I TOOK refuge in the presbytery immediately after the death of my aunt, who never once asked to see me during her illness, and whom Suzon cared for with much devotion.

The curé had written to M. de Pavol, informing him of Madame de Laval's sickness, but the progress of the disease was so rapid that my uncle got the despatch announcing its fatal termination before he was able to answer the curé's letter. He telegraphed at once that it was impossible for him to be present at the funeral.

The next day we received a letter from him saying that he was only partially recovered from an attack of gout, and could not go to Le Buisson. He requested the curé to accompany me, a few days later on, to C—, where he hoped to be well enough to meet me.

My aunt was buried without pomp or ceremony. She had never been liked, and her

passage to the other world was not attended by any great parade of sympathy.

During my return from the funeral I did my best to feel sorrowful, but the attempt was unsuccessful. All the reproaches of my conscience could not hinder my heart and soul from being stirred by a sense of deliverance. If I had then been acquainted with the saying of a certain celebrity, I should certainly have applied it to my own case, and exclaimed, in a magnificent outburst of misanthropy :

“I know not what goes on in the heart of a miscreant, but I do know the heart of a rather good little girl, and what I see there appalls me.”

But as this aphorism was then entirely unknown to me I could not use it as an excuse for my indifference, and so give satisfaction to the ghostly shade of my aunt. My uncle had fixed the 10th of August for my departure, and I spent the two previous days with the curé, whose kindly face underwent a change from hour to hour as the time of our separation grew nearer.

He had an excellent breakfast ready for me on Tuesday morning, and we sat opposite each other for the last time and tried to

strengthen ourselves for the ordeal. But every mouthful choked us, and I had all the trouble in the world to keep back my tears.

The poor curé had passed a sleepless night. His sorrow was too great to allow him to close an eye, and so, not being able to escort me to C—, he spent the night in writing a letter of seventeen pages, in which, as I learned afterwards, he gave my uncle a full enumeration of all my merits, great, small, and middling. Of my defects he did not say a word.

“My dear little child,” said he, after a long silence, “you will not forget your old curé?”

“Never, never!” I cried impetuously.

“And you will not forget my counsels, either, I hope. Distrust your imagination, my little Reine. I compare it to a beautiful flame that gives light and life to the understanding when it is fed discreetly; but if it be fed excessively it becomes a bonfire which often sets the house ablaze, the conflagration leaving nothing behind it but ashes and scoræ.”

“I will try to manage the flame judiciously, M. le Curé; but I must confess to a partiality for bonfires.”

“That’s very well, but beware of a conflagration! Do not play with fire, Reine.”

“Not even with a tiny little bit of a bonfire, M. le Curé? Why, such a thing is charming! And, if there is any danger of a conflagration, it is so easy to throw a little cold water on it.”

“But where are you to find the cold water, my child?”

“Oh, I don’t know now, but I shall learn some day, perhaps!”

“God forbid!” cried the curé “The cold water you would find, my dear little child, would be the deceptions and sorrows of life, and I will pray ardently every day that they may be removed from your path.”

The tears got the better of me at these words of my curé, and I swallowed a large glass of water to calm my emotion.

“Before leaving,” I said, “I ought to warn you that I think I have a very decided taste for coquetry.”

“That is the weak point in all women, I know that much,” said the curé, with his benevolent smile, “but you must not go too far, Reine. For that matter, you will be very much in society, and your experience there will enable you to reduce your senti-

ments to the proper equilibrium, and then your uncle is perfectly capable of acting as your guide."

"Society must be delightful, M. le Curé, and, as I am so pretty, I am sure to please"—

"No doubt, no doubt, but beware of exaggerated compliments; beware of vanity."

"Oh, it is natural to like to please, surely there is no harm in that!"

"Hum! that is a rather easy-going kind of morality," answered the curé, ruffling up his hair. "Well, well, that sort of reasoning belongs to your time of life, and, thank God! you are not yet in the situation of the Ecclesiast when he exclaimed: 'Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity!'"

"What an extravagant person that Ecclesiast of yours must have been! But then, he is so old! I presume his ideas must be quite obsolete at this time of day."

"Well, well, let us put that aside. It would be too much to expect that the Holy Scriptures and the thoughts of a poor country priest should be comprehended by a girl who is young and pretty, and who, I can see, has anything but a modest opinion of her features."

He looked at me with a smile, but his lips

trembled, for the hour of separation was at hand.

“Take care not to catch cold on this journey, Reine.”

“Why, M. le Curé, we are now in August, and the heat is stifling!”

“Very true,” answered the curé, who was losing his head a little. “Then do not wrap yourself up excessively; you might get a chill afterwards.”

After a few useless attempts to swallow some crumbs of bread and pastry we left the table.

“Oh, how grieved I am to leave you,” I cried, suddenly bursting into a fit of sobbing; “how grieved I am to leave you, my dear, dear curé!”

“Don’t weep, don’t weep, this is quite absurd!” said the curé, unconscious that the big tears were rolling down his own cheeks.

“Ah, my curé,” I resumed, seized with sudden remorse, “how often I have made you angry!”

“No, no, you have been the joy of my life, you have been all my happiness.”

“And, oh, my poor curé! what is going to become of you without me?”

The curé did not answer. He took a few

long strides across the hall, blew his nose violently, and succeeded in controlling the emotion that clung to his throat, demanding to find an outlet in a sob.

The maringote was at the door. Perrine, arrayed in all her finery, was to keep me company as far as C—, and there hand me over to my uncle. The task of driving us was entrusted to the farmer instead of to Suzon, who was entirely absorbed in her grief and was to have charge of Le Buisson for a time.

I directed Jean to go on, and the curé and I walked together a little piece of the road, so as to be with each other as long as possible.

“I will write to you every day, M. le Curé.”

“I do not ask so much as that, my dear child. Just write to me once a month, and tell me everything.”

“I will write everything, everything! — even my ideas about love.”

“That’s to be seen!” said the curé, with an incredulous smile. “There will be so much novelty in the life you will lead, and you will have so many distractions, that I do not count much on your punctuality.”

Meanwhile Jean had stopped to wait for

us, and I saw it was time to start. I grasped the hands of my curé, weeping from my very heart.

“Life has some ugly moments, M. le Curé!”

“They ’ll pass, they ’ll pass,” he answered, with a gasp. “Good-by, my good and dear little child; do not forget, and distrust, distrust” —

But he was unable to finish the sentence, and helped me hurriedly into the carryall.

I took my aunt’s old seat, and was crushed on one side by a trunk that had no lock, and on the other by the innumerable and queerly shaped bundles made up by Perrine.

“Adieu, my curé! Adieu, my good old curé!” I cried.

He made an affectionate gesture and turned round abruptly. I had a view of him through my tears striding along at a great rate and with his hat on his head, a most signal proof that he was not only in the most violent condition of mental and moral excitement, but that all his ideas were turned upside-down entirely.

After sobbing for a good ten minutes I came to the conclusion that it was time to follow the advice of Perrine, who was repeating in every variety of tone:

“Do be reasonable, ma’m’selle; do be reasonable!”

I stuffed my handkerchief away in my pocket and began to reflect.

In truth, life is very strange! Who could have imagined a fortnight ago that my dreams would have been realized so speedily, and that I should see M. de Conprat so soon? This seductive idea scattered the last clouds that overshadowed my life and set me thinking that the skies were beautiful, life was sweet, and aunts who depart for heaven or for purgatory were gifted with superior wisdom.

My second thoughts dealt with my uncle. I looked forward with extreme anxiety to the impression I was likely to produce on him, and I was keenly conscious of the absurdity of the black gown and queer hat in which, thanks to Perrine, I was dressed. They made me look like a scarecrow. The hat especially made me feel as if I were on the rack. It was made out of crape which had been in use at the time of M. de Lavalley’s death, and looked as if a band of saucy snails had chosen it for the scene of their frolics. That it disfigured me frightfully was as clear as noonday, and, when this idea became insupportable,

I took it off, crumpled it up, and put it in my pocket, the depth and roominess of which did credit to Suzon's practical genius.

Next, the dread of appearing stupid troubled me: I knew that a multitude of things that must seem natural to everybody else would be to me a constant source of wonder and admiration. In order, then, that my self-esteem might not encounter the risk of attracting ridicule, I resolved to hide any surprise I might feel with the greatest care.

These various considerations prevented me from finding the journey long, and I was under the impression that we were a considerable distance from C — just as we were on the point of entering it. We drove straight to the station, after passing through the town as rapidly as the stiffened legs of our horse allowed.

My uncle being neither tall nor thin, I had naturally painted him in my own imagination as lank and long. I was somewhat taken aback, therefore, to see a good-natured-looking man coming toward the carryall and crying in as loud a voice as my uncle ever used:

“Good-day, niece, I really believe I was nearly kept waiting.”

¹ An observation made by Louis XIV. when his carriage arrived barely at the appointed time. — *Tr.*

He helped me out of the carriage and gave me a cordial kiss. Then, after looking me over attentively from head to foot, he said :

"No bigger than a fairy, but devilishly pretty, for all that!"

"I am quite of your opinion, uncle," I answered, modestly casting down my eyes.

"Ah! you are of my opinion, are you?"

"Of course; it is the opinion of the curé, and of — But here is a letter he wrote you, uncle."

"Why is he not here?"

"He was prevented by several religious duties."

"I'm sorry, I should have liked to see him. You have no hat, niece?"

"I have, uncle; it is in my pocket."

"In your pocket! And why, pray?"

"Because it is so ugly, uncle."

"A fine reason, that! This is the first time I ever heard of a young lady wearing her hat in her pocket! It is not customary to travel without a hat, my dear. Make haste and put it on while I am having the luggage checked."

Rather put out of countenance by this rebuke, I planted my hat on my head again, not without having it brought home to me

that a journey in a pocket is anything but healthful for this specimen of human industry.

Then I bade good-by to Jean and Perrine.

“Ma’m’selle,” said Perrine, “I could not be sorrier for parting from you if you were one of the best and handsomest cows I have!”

“Much obliged, I’m sure!” said I, between laughing and crying. “Kiss me, and good-by.”

I kissed the firm red cheeks of Perrine, upon which, I am much afraid, more than one beguiling rascal had also imprinted his kisses, either stealthily or noisily.

“Good-by, Jean.”

“Hope to see you soon again, ma’m’selle,” returned Jean, laughing stupidly, which was his way of manifesting strong emotion.

A few minutes after, I was in the train, seated in front of my uncle, and absolutely scared by the bustle about the station and the novelty of my position. When I was a little at my ease I examined M. de Pavol.

My uncle was of medium height, well-proportioned, with thick red hands not very well cared for, and, at first sight, did not look at all aristocratic. His face was ruddy, his forehead lofty, his nose large, and his hair

was cropped very close ; the eyes were small, penetrating, and were deeply sunken beneath bushy, prominent eyebrows. But it did not take long to discover under these externals the man of birth and fashion. The salient and most striking feature of his face was the mouth. Firmly and vigorously moulded, and, on the whole, rather handsome, although the under lip was a little thick, this mouth had an expression of shrewdness and irony, of mockery and sarcasm, that upset the most insolent and rooted them to the spot. After studying this mouth a person forgot entirely the vulgar aspects of my uncle's exterior, or rather began to see there was nothing really vulgar about him, and that his rustic appearance was an admirable frame, specially fitted for throwing that clever, delicate mouth into relief.

My uncle did not speak much, and always slowly, but whatever he did say was generally sure to hit the mark. He was fond of sometimes using expressions that were just a little energetic, and their effectiveness was increased by the quiet, deliberate way in which he uttered them. Although he was scarcely sixty, his spirits were somewhat depressed by physical suffering, as he was subject to fre-

quent attacks of the gout. But, even if he no longer possessed his old-time keenness of repartee, his mouth, with a movement that was almost imperceptible, could still express the most delicate shades of irony, malice, raillery, or open derision, and I have seen people paralyzed by my uncle before he had uttered a word.

I was, naturally, too inexperienced to make a very deep study of M. de Pavol all at once, but I observed him with the very greatest interest. He, too, while he was reading the curé's letter, flashed an occasional scrutinizing glance upon me, as if with the view of finding out whether or not my countenance contradicted the assertions of the curé.

"You are looking at me very intently, niece," said he. "Would it be because, perchance, you find me handsome?"

"Not the least bit in the world."

My uncle winced a little.

"If that's not frankness I don't know what frankness is. And would you tell me why you are so pale?"

"Because I'm half dead with fear, uncle."

"Fear! and of what?"

"We're going so fast — it's awful!"

"Ah, yes, I understand; this is the first

time you have travelled. Pluck up your courage ; there 's no danger."

"Is my cousin at Le Pavol, uncle ?"

"Certainly ; and she will be very glad to make your acquaintance."

After putting a few questions to me about my aunt, and my life at Le Buisson, he took up a journal and did not speak another word until we reached V—.

Then we took our places in a landau, drawn by two horses, and drove to Le Pavol. My coarse-looking bundles were piled up in this elegant vehicle, and the shabby figure they made cut me to the quick.

As soon as I was seated my uncle handed me a bag of cakes by way of refreshment, and plunged into another journal.

This mode of acting at last began to nettle me.

It is not in my nature to keep silent for very long, and, besides, I had a great number of questions to ask. So when the novelty of being whirled along in a pretty, well-padded, luxurious carriage began to pall upon me I ventured to break silence.

"Uncle," said I, "if you would not mind stopping reading we might talk a little."

"I am perfectly willing, niece," answered

my uncle, immediately folding his paper. "I thought you might like to follow the train of your own thoughts. Well, what shall we discuss? The Eastern question, political economy, the dressing of dolls, or the habits of monkeys?"

"All that has little interest for me; and as to the habits of monkeys, I fancy I know quite as much on that subject as you do, uncle."

"Very likely you do, I have no doubt," answered M. de Pavol, astounded at my coolness. "Well, then, choose your subject."

"Say, uncle, are you not something of a scoundrel?"

"Eh? What the devil is that you're saying, niece?"

"I am asking, uncle, whether you are not something of a miscreant or scoundrel."

"You —, are you actually quizzing me?" cried my uncle, using a word that was anything but parliamentary.

"Don't get angry, uncle, I am beginning a study of manners and customs that have far more interest than those of monkeys. I want to learn whether my aunt was right or not; she insisted all men are scoundrels. Now, is that true?"

“But your aunt had not common sense, had she?”

“She showed considerable when she made up her mind to set out for another world; but not on any other occasion that I know of,” I answered tranquilly.

M. de Pavol regarded me with evident astonishment.

“Upon my word, niece, you surprise me! Your way of expressing your thoughts is somewhat crude, to say the least of it. So you and Madame de Lavalley did not get along very well together?”

“We did n’t get along at all. She was very disagreeable and beat me more than once. Ask the curé; she turned him out of doors, because he took my side. And how is it, uncle, that you left me so long with her? She was a common woman, and you did not like her.”

“When your parents died, Reine, my wife was very ill, and I felt only too well pleased when my sister-in-law consented to take charge of you. I saw you again when you were six, and at that time you seemed gay and happy. After that, faith, I nearly forgot all about you! I am exceedingly sorry now, since you were not happy.”

“And you will let me stay with you always now, uncle?”

“Most certainly,” replied M. de Pavol, almost energetically.

“When I say *always*, I mean until my marriage, for I intend getting married soon.”

“You intend getting married soon? What! You are hardly out of the nursery, and you talk of getting married! Marriage is an absurd invention, and it is well you should know it, niece.”

“And why?”

“Because women are not worth a rush,” answered my uncle, with an air of the most thorough conviction.

I fell back in my corner, quite astounded, and thinking my uncle’s opinion of women not at all flattering to my aunt De Pavol. When I had digested these last words of my uncle I resumed:

“But since I am not going to marry a woman it is perfectly immaterial to me whether women are worth a rush or not. My husband will have to get along with me as well as he can.”

“Fine logic, that. So it seems you know how to reason. Young girls are all wild to get married, that’s a dead certainty.”

"Then my cousin has the same ideas that I have?"

"Yes," answered my uncle gloomily.

"Ah, so much the better!" said I, rubbing my hands. "Is my cousin tall?"

"Tall and beautiful," replied M. de Pavol complacently; "a real goddess, and the delight of my eyes. But you will see her in a moment, for we are at the house."

And as he was speaking we turned into an avenue of gigantic elms, which led to the château.

My cousin was waiting for us on the steps. She took me in her arms with the majestic air of a queen who is granting a boon to one of her subjects.

"Good gracious, how beautiful you are!" said I, gazing at her in amazement.

Most assuredly we seldom come across perfect and unquestioned beauty, but there could be no discussion with regard to that of my cousin: it forced recognition. She was not always pleasing, for her features were haughty, and sometimes a little hard, but even those who admired her least were compelled to say, with my uncle:

"She is devilishly beautiful!"

She had brown hair which fell low down

over her forehead, a Grecian profile of the most perfect purity, a lovely complexion, blue eyes with dark lashes, and delicately pencilled eyebrows. Tall and strong, with a well-developed bust, she would have been taken to be more than eighteen, but that her mouth, in spite of its somewhat scornful curves, — threatening to become more decided later on, — had some of those childish, indefinite movements that denote extreme youth. Her bearing and gestures were slow, rather careless, though always harmonious and unaffected. A friend of M. de Pavol had one day said, laughingly, that at twenty-five she would resemble Juno in every feature. The name clung to her.

I conceived a real passion for my splendid cousin in a moment, and my uncle was much amused at my amazement.

“Then you never saw a pretty woman before, niece?”

“I have never seen anything; I have been buried alive in a hole.”

“Why did you not look in your glass, Reine? M. de Conprat told us you were pretty.”

“Paul de Conprat?” I exclaimed.

“The very same,” answered my uncle. “I

forgot to speak about him. He took refuge at Le Buisson during a storm, did he not?"

"I remember," said I, blushing.

"He is to lunch with us on Monday, Blanche, is he not?"

"Yes, father, I had a letter from the major to-day accepting the invitation — Why, Reine, who dressed you?"

"Suzon, my aunt's second self in bad taste and stupidity," I answered rancorously.

"We shall remedy the poverty of your toilet to-morrow, niece. Only try to be a little more respectful to Madame de Laval's memory. You did not like her, but she is dead, and let us wish peace to her soul! Come to dinner; Juno will show you your apartments afterwards."

I spent a part of the night at my window, full of delicious musings and gazing at the sombre masses of the lofty trees of this Pavol, where I was to laugh and weep, be amused and saddened, and, at last, witness the fulfilment of my destiny.

So happy did I feel that evening that my curé was no longer anything but a faint, almost imperceptible point in my memory.

CHAPTER IX.

BUT let no one conclude from this that my heart is light and fickle; my forgetfulness was but momentary, and three days after my arrival at Pavol I wrote the following letter to my curé:

MY DEAR CURÉ: I have so many things to say to you, so many discoveries to inform you of, so many secrets to impart to you, that I really don't know where to commence. You will make no mistake in believing me when I tell you that the skies are finer here than at Le Buisson, the trees taller, the flowers fresher; that, in fact, everything around me is a source of pleasure. An uncle is a lucky invention of nature, and my cousin is as beautiful as a fairy. All the scolding, and lecturing, and preaching in the world, my dear curé, will not prevent me from maintaining that if the women loved by Francis I. were as handsome as Blanche de Pavol the solidity of his judgment deserves the greatest credit. Why, M. le Curé, you would fall in love with her yourself, if you saw her. Still, I will confess to you that her queenly airs intimidate me a little, and you know I am not easily intimidated. And then she is so tall — and I had hoped she might be little; it would have been a consolation, although I have now found out that my figure, small though

it be, is supple, elegant, and symmetrical. But all the same, I ask you why could n't God have added a few inches to my height? What harm would it have done Him? You must allow, M. le Curé, that God is just a little provoking.

I will not speak of my uncle, for I know you to be acquainted with him. But I am already quite sure I shall like him, and it is plain to me I have made a conquest of him. It is a piece of great good fortune, my dear curé, to have a pretty face, a piece of much greater good fortune than you ever cared to mention; when you have it you can please everybody, and when I am a grandmother I intend telling my grandchildren that it was the first and most ravishing discovery I made on my entrance into life. But we have still time enough to think of that.

Although I meet one surprise after another I have become perfectly accustomed to Pavol and the luxury that surrounds me. However, I should now and then utter a cry of astonishment were I not afraid of appearing ridiculous; but to you, my dear curé, I may confess that sometimes I cannot believe my eyes.

We went to V—the day before yesterday for the purpose of buying dresses for me, Suzon's achievements in the seamstress line being simply awful! Don't go on deluding yourself, my poor curé; notwithstanding your admiration for certain gowns, when I came here I looked like a fright, a perfect fright.

What a delightful place a city is! I have been lost in ecstasy, struck all of a heap, in presence of the shops, houses, churches, streets, and what not, while Blanche made fun of me and told me V— was a wretched hole of a place. I wonder what she 'd think of Le Buisson if she saw it, then! After a three hours' consultation with the dress-maker and milliner, my cousin, who is very pious, went to confession, and left me to make some purchases with the maid. My uncle had given me money, cautioning me to lay it out in the purchase of things useful and practical. Just as if I did not know what was useful and practical! I ran at once to a confectioner's and eat my fill of little cakes; I confess humbly, my dear curé, to a passion for little cakes. While engaged in this exercise, which you must admit to be as useful as pleasant, for, after all, it is a duty to support this body of clay, I noticed a number of pretty objects in the shop opposite the confectioner's. I crossed over at once and bought forty-two little terracotta statuettes, — the loveliest little men you ever saw, — in fact, all there was for sale. This left me without a sou and in debt beside; however, that does n't matter, as I am rich. My cousin laughed heartily, but my uncle scolded. He insisted that reason should guide and control every one, great or small; that it is beneficial at every period in our lives; and that when we refuse its aid we are liable to commit every kind of folly; as, for instance, when you buy forty-two

terra-cotta statuettes, instead of providing yourself with stockings and chemises. I listened with an appearance of humility and contrition, my dear curé, but during my uncle's concluding remarks, which were eloquent, I assure you, my rebellious spirit endowed reason with an ungainly body, a long nose, — of the Roman type, too, — a sour, withered face; and the person I created bore such a striking resemblance to my aunt that I took a thorough dislike to reason on the spot. Such was the result of my uncle's oratorical display. Meanwhile, I have my forty-two little men; they weep, smile, make faces in every corner of my room, and I am quite satisfied.

Yesterday evening I talked with Blanche of love, M. le Curé. Why have you told me it existed only in books and did not concern little girls? Ah, my curé, my curé! I am afraid you have practised on my credulity very often. We are going into society as soon as the first weeks of mourning have slipped by. My uncle believes me to be too young. But I cannot stay by myself at Pavol. If I had to, there would be only one thing left to do: fling myself out of the window or set the house on fire.

It seems I am very likely to be a great success. I am pretty, and, in addition, I have a big dowry. Blanche tells me a pretty face without a dowry has but little value; but that both together form a perfect whole and make up a dish of the rarest kind. I am, then, my dear curé, a savory,

succulent, and dainty morsel, which will be coveted, pursued, and swallowed in a jiffy, if I am gracious enough to allow it. However, don't be uneasy, I will not allow it, unless — But hush!

And to conclude, M. le Curé, I am very impatient for the coming of Monday, only I shall not tell you why. On that day an event is to occur that sends my heart beating furiously, an event that makes me whirl round on my heels until I am quite out of breath, makes me throw my hat up in the air, dance, and commit a thousand follies. Heavens, what a beautiful thing is life!

But nothing is perfect, for you are not here, and I miss you sadly. How much I miss you, my poor curé, I cannot describe. I should so like to be your guide through the château and well-kept gardens, so different from Le Buisson, and watch you as you admired them. I should so like to see you enjoying the easy, luxurious life we all lead here! Everything is arranged in the most perfect order, even to the slightest detail, and I really feel as if I were in Paradise. Not a moment passes that does not supply some fresh occasion of pleasure or admiration, and not a moment passes that I do not wish you here to share them with me. I look around for you, I call for you, but the echoes of this beautiful park are dumb.

Adieu, my dear, good curé; I do not send you a kiss, because a curé is not to be kissed, though why, I cannot for the life of me tell, but I send

you the expression of the love and affection for you that fill my heart. I worship you, M. le Curé.

REINE.

It is quite certain that I grew at once familiar with the atmosphere of elegance and luxury into which I had been so abruptly translated. It is equally certain that although Blanche was very friendly, and insisted we should address each other as "thou," she did frighten me during the days immediately following my arrival at Pavol. Her goddess-like bearing, her somewhat haughty demeanor, the idea that she was far more experienced than I, all this had its effect and prevented me from feeling quite at my ease with her. This impression, however, lasted about as long as does the hoar-frost when exposed to the rays of an April sun, and a conversation I had with her on Sunday morning had the effect of entirely dispelling the superiority which I had ascribed to her.

I was still in bed, half dozing, blissfully cuddling myself up in the bedclothes, opening an eye now and then and gazing with ecstasy on my cheery, comfortable room, my little men in terra-cotta, and the trees I could see through the open window. Blanche entered

in a long, trailing morning robe, her hair streaming over her shoulders, and a look of anxiety on her face.

"Reine," said she, sitting down at the foot of my bed, "I came in to talk with you."

"As beautiful as the most beautiful of Walter Scott's heroines!" I said admiringly.

"Reine," she observed, sitting at the foot of the bed, "I want to have a chat with you."

"Nothing could please me better. But I am only half awake, and my ideas are rather in a tangle."

"Even though the point I came to talk about is marriage?" returned Blanche, who was already aware of my opinion on this grave question.

"Marriage? Then I'm very much awake, I can tell you!" suddenly sitting up.

"You would like to marry, Reine?"

"Like to marry? What a question! I should say so!—and that, too, as early as possible. I simply adore men; I am far fonder of them than I am of women, unless the women happen to be as lovely as you are."

"It is not proper to talk of adoring men," said Blanche severely.

"And why?"

"I do not know very well why, but I

assure you it is not the right thing for a young girl to do."

"So much the worse! Still, that is my opinion," I answered, covering myself up in the blankets again.

"Child!" retorted Blanche, regarding me with a sort of compassionate air I thought highly offensive, "I have come to talk with you about my father."

"What has happened?"

"Well, it is just this. Like yourself, I want to be married some day or other; there have been several suitors for my hand, and my father has rejected them all. I did not mind particularly, for I am in no hurry. I will wait until I am twenty; still, I should like to know whether he intends always opposing my marriage."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Ah, that is the difficulty!" replied Blanche, somewhat embarrassed. "I confess I stand in some fear or, at least, awe of my father."

Astonished beyond measure, I rose on my elbow, brushing aside the hair that covered my face, so as to get a better view of my cousin. On that very moment she came tumbling down from the Olympian clouds upon which I had enthroned her, and, beneath

the outward mask of Juno I discovered a young girl that could never, never frighten me again.

"Well, I should like to see the person that would overawe me!" I cried, hurling my pillow into the middle of the room.

Blanche looked at me, open-mouthed.

"Why, what are you doing, Reine?"

"Oh, it's a way I have! When I was at Le Buisson I used to fling the pillows in all directions, it didn't matter where, so long as it infuriated Suzon, and that little amusement of mine used to drive her stark, staring mad."

"As Suzon is not here, perhaps it would be as well to take my advice and give up the habit. But to return to what we were saying, do you feel you have sufficient courage to open a discussion on marriage with your uncle? He is never done inveighing against it."

"Why, of course! If there is anything I am great upon it is arguing, and that you'll soon see! I'll attack my uncle immediately. There will be no dallying about the matter on my part, you take my word!"

During dinner I let my cousin know by an expressive pantomime that I was ready for the struggle. My uncle, who scented danger, watched us from under his bushy eyebrows,

and Blanche, already alarmed, made a sign to me to keep quiet. But I snapped my fingers, gave a loud cough, and jumped resolutely into the arena.

"Uncle, can a person have children without being married?"

"No, certainly not," replied my uncle, apparently much amused at the question.

"Would it be a misfortune if the human race disappeared?"

"Hum! that is a serious question. The philanthropists would answer, yes, and the misanthropists, no."

"But I want your opinion, uncle."

"It is a point I have n't given much consideration to. Still, as whatever Providence does is well done, I vote for the perpetuation of the human species."

"Then, uncle, since you condemn marriage, you run counter to your own opinion."

"Indeed! You don't say so!"

"As it is not possible to have children without marriage, and as you vote for the propagation of the human race, it follows that you ought to be in favor of everybody marrying."

"*Ventre Saint-Gris!*" exclaimed M. de Pavol, with such a cynical curl of the lip

that Blanche became crimson; "that is what I call reasoning! And pray might I ask, niece, what is marriage according to your ideas?"

"Marriage?" said I enthusiastically; "why, it is one of the finest institutions that exist on earth! An eternal union between those who love! They sing and dance and kiss each other's hand — Oh, it is heavenly!"

"They kiss each other's hand, do they? And why the hand, niece?"

"Because it is — well, it is an idea I have," I answered, smiling enigmatically as I thought of a certain incident in the past.

"Marriage is an institution which delivers up a victim to the executioner," growled my uncle.

"Oh!!!"

Juno and I protested with the greatest energy.

"And which of them is the victim, father?"

"The man, *parbleu!*"

"The worse for the men, then," I answered resolutely. "Let them defend themselves! As for myself, I am ready to qualify for an executioner at a moment's notice."

"What are you driving at now, young ladies?"

“At this, uncle: Blanche and I are devoted partisans of marriage, and have determined on putting our theories into practice, and that, too, as early as possible.”

“Reine!” cried my cousin, astounded at my audacity.

“I am just telling nothing but the truth, Blanche; only you are willing to wait, and I have no such patience.”

“You don’t say so! And you don’t happen to have any particular young man in your eye, eh?” inquired my uncle.

“How could she?” said Blanche, laughing; “she does not know a soul!”

Ever since I came to Pavol I had given a good deal of thought to my love for M. de Conprat, and had often asked myself if I ought to confide this inmost secret of my heart to my cousin. But, after frequently turning the matter over in my mind, I came to the conclusion that under present circumstances I had better break with all my principles, and, like the Arabs, act on the maxim that silence is golden. Still, this assertion of Blanche put me on my mettle, and, in spite of all my resolutions, I almost felt like revealing my secret; I managed, however, to get the better of the temptation.

“In any case I am sure to fall in love some day or other, for life without love is impossible.”

“Really! May I ask where you got those ideas, Reine?”

“Why, uncle, love is life. You just only look at the heroines of Sir Walter Scott: how they love and are loved in return!”

“Eh! So the curé allowed you to read novels, it seems, and gave you lectures on love also?”

“My poor curé! Did n’t I drive the dear man wild on account of that very thing! Why, uncle, he would n’t let me glance at a single novel, and took care even to carry off the key of the library, but I broke a pane and got in through the window.”

“Upon my word, you promise well! So, then, you have set out on a wild-goose chase, and are indulging in all sorts of foolish fancies about love?”

“I never indulge in foolish fancies, and, above all, on that point; I understand what I’m talking about perfectly.”

“The devil you do!” said my uncle, laughing. “But you told me a moment ago you were not in love with any one!”

“That is quite certain!” I answered

warmly, somewhat confused at my blunder. "But don't you think, uncle, that reflection can make up for experience?"

"Oh, I have n't the least doubt of it, especially on the subject we have been discussing. Besides, any one who looks at you can see you have a finely organized brain."

"No, uncle, I am simply logical; that is all there is to it. By the way, does a woman ever love any man except her husband?"

"No, never," answered M. de Pavol, with a smile.

"That clinches the matter! Since a person never loves any one except her husband, and since no one can live without love, the conclusion is self-evident: every one is bound to get married."

"Granted, but not before reaching the age of twenty-one, young ladies."

"I am sure I don't care," answered Blanche.

"Yes, but I do, and I have n't the slightest notion of waiting five years."

"You may make up your mind, Reine, to wait five years, unless something extraordinary happens."

"What do you mean by something extraordinary, uncle?"

“The appearance of a suitor so unobjectionable in every respect that it would be folly to refuse him.”

I was so pleased with this modification in my uncle's programme that I had to rise and execute a few turns on my heel.

“Then I have the game in my own hands!” I cried, making for the door.

Soon after, I was safe in my room, and Juno came sailing in with an air of great majesty.

“What a bold girl you are, Reine!”

“A bold girl? So that's the way you thank me for doing what you asked me!”

“Yes, but you have such a blunt way of putting things!”

“That's my way. I rather like bluntness.”

“Besides, it really looked as if you took a pleasure in worrying my father.”

“I should n't worry him for the world; I like him, with that quizzical face of his; in fact, I am passionately in love with him already. But that is not the question, Blanche; it is he who worries, maddens us by his flings at marriage, and, at all events, you now know what you wanted to know.”

“Certainly,” said Blanche dreamily.

M. de Pavol was soon to learn, at his own

expense, that, if women are bad, little girls are worse, and are capable of trampling with callous insensibility on the ideas of a father and an uncle.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN I rose on Monday morning I felt exceedingly happy. I had dreamed of Paul de Conprat during the night, and I uttered a cry of joy on awaking.

The delight of being gowned in a fashion that transcended my highest anticipations added to my excitement, and, after I was dressed, I contemplated my image in the glass with protracted and silent admiration. Then I whirled ecstatically out of my chamber and into the corridor, falling plump into the arms of my uncle and narrowly escaping flinging him on the floor.

“Why, where are you running to, niece?”

“Going to all the rooms, uncle, to look at myself in all the glasses. Don’t I look sweet?”

“You certainly look passable, I admit.”

“And my shape — does not this gown set it off to perfection?”

“You are charming!” answered M. de

Pavol, who seemed delighted at my happiness and kissed me on both cheeks.

“Ah, yes, uncle! I am indeed happy! It somehow comes into my noddle — as Perrine would say — that the unobjectionable one will heave in sight before long.”

Thereupon I took to my heels and whipped into Juno's room like a thunderbolt.

“Look!” I cried, spinning round so swiftly that all my cousin could see was a confused whirlwind of skirts and petticoats.

“Do be quiet a moment, Reine,” said my cousin, with her usual calmness. “Will you never learn to exercise a little self-control? Yes, your gown fits you well.”

“And see what a little foot I've got!” I went on, advancing my leg.

“What a born coquette you are!” cried Blanche, laughing. “Who could ever have imagined a little country chit like you reaching such a degree of coquetry so soon?”

“It's nothing to what you'll see me reach before long,” I answered gravely. “I have found out, you see, that coquetry is a duty, one of the serious duties of life.”

“It is the first time I ever heard so. And pray who taught you that? Surely not your curé?”

"No, no; a person who understood all about it. Are any others coming to lunch besides the De Conprats, Blanche?"

"Yes; the curé and two of my father's friends."

We waited for our guests in the drawing-room, and my uncle entered after a few moments, accompanied by Major de Conprat, to whom he presented me.

And oh, what a fine, noble face was that of the major! Hair and mustache as white as the driven snow, and eyes as limpid as a child's; such kindness and benevolence beamed from him that I thought at once of my curé, although there was not any real resemblance between them. I felt drawn to him immediately, and saw the attraction was mutual.

"So this is the little relative I have heard so much of," said he, taking my hands. "Permit me to kiss you, my child; I was your father's friend."

I let him kiss me without any reluctance, though whispering to myself that I should have been somewhat better pleased if his son had been in his place during this delicate operation.

At last he came in!—and I would have exchanged my entire dowry and my pretty

gown into the bargain for the right to run up and throw my arms around his neck.

He shook hands with my cousin, but bowed so ceremoniously to me that I felt quite crest-fallen.

"Shake hands with me also," said I; "you are quite well aware that we are acquainted."

"I was awaiting your good pleasure, mademoiselle."

"What nonsense!"

"Reine, Reine!" said my uncle sharply.

"A wild-flower, in some degree," said the major, with a friendly glance at me, "but a very pretty flower, in any case!"

These words were not successful in banishing a certain irritation I experienced without exactly knowing its cause, and, for a time, I remained silent in my corner, giving all my attention to M. de Conprat, who was chatting gayly with Blanche.

Ah, how I liked him! and how fast my heart went when I recognized again that honest laugh and the white teeth and the candid eyes of which I had dreamed so often in my frightful old home! And my aunt, my curé, Suzon, the damp garden, the cherry tree he had climbed—all flitted across my memory like fugitive shadows.

But it was not long before I began to join in the conversation, and by the time we entered the dining-room I had partially recovered my good humor.

My seat was between the curé and M. de Conprat, and I immediately attacked the latter.

“Why did you never return to Le Buisson?” I said.

“I haven’t been always my own master, cousin.”

“Were you at least sorry you could n’t?”

“Extremely, I assure you.”

“Then, why did you not shake hands with me when you entered?”

“But, mademoiselle, it was for you to do that, according to all the rules of etiquette.”

“Etiquette indeed! Etiquette did n’t trouble you much when we were yonder!”

“The situation was rather peculiar. You see we weren’t in society, far from it!” he answered, with a smile.

“And does being in society hinder a person from being friendly?”

“Well, not exactly; only there are certain social laws that sometimes force us to curb our friendly impulses.”

“How stupid!” I said curtly.

But the explanation was, on the whole, satisfactory, and I was again in high spirits. Still, after talking with him awhile I saw he did not attach as much importance as I did to the words he had said to me at Le Buisson. But I was so happy at being able to look at him and converse with him that, for the moment, this little disappointment passed off without affecting my confidence in the future.

M. de Conprat informed us there would be several balls during the month of October.

"I am very glad of the news," answered Juno.

"You must teach me to dance, Blanche," I said, jumping up from my chair.

"What if you let me be your professor?" cried Paul de Conprat.

"Paul is the paragon of waltzers," said the major; "all the women are wild to waltz with him."

"And besides, he is so charming!" I answered warmly.

The major and his son laughed; the curé and my uncle's two friends shook their heads, smiling paternally. But M. de Pavol looked highly displeased, and my cousin raised her eyebrows with a movement peculiar to her

when she felt annoyed, a movement so scornful at the present moment that I became painfully conscious I must have said something silly.

After luncheon we rambled through the woods. I had brightened up again and was chattering away incessantly, amusing myself by mimicking the manners and accent of one of our guests, whose ludicrous oddities had struck me.

"Reine, you are really very unladylike!" said Blanche.

"But he does talk this way," said I, pinching my nose the better to imitate the voice of my victim.

And M. de Conprat laughed. Juno assumed an imposing air of dignified reproof, which did not disturb me the least bit in the world.

There came a moment when he and I were together alone, my cousin having walked away from us unconcernedly. I perceived that he looked after her very often.

"Is she not beautiful?" said I, in the innocence of my heart.

"Beautiful, exceedingly beautiful!" he answered, in a repressed tone that startled me.

A doubt, a presentiment, flashed across my mind; but at sixteen, impressions of this

nature are fugitive, vanishing like the butterflies that flit around us, and, up to the moment our guests were taking leave of M. de Pavol, I was in a state of exuberant gayety.

After they had all left, my uncle retired to the library and summoned me before him.

“Reine, you have made yourself ridiculous!”

“But how, uncle?”

“To tell a young man he was charming! Did any one ever hear of the like!”

“But since I believed it to be true, uncle?”

“The greater reason to keep it to yourself.”

“What?” I returned, quite bewildered. “Should I have said I thought him the reverse of charming?”

“You should not have said one thing or the other. You may have whatever opinions you like, but you need n’t take the whole world into your confidence.”

“Still, it is very natural to say what you think, uncle!”

“Not in society, niece. Half of the time we must say what we don’t think and hide what we do.”

“What a frightful maxim!” I exclaimed, horrified. “I shall never be able to practise it.”

“You ’ll get there in time ; but meanwhile you must obey the laws of etiquette.”

“Oh, etiquette, etiquette ! It’s always turning up !” I answered, leaving the room in anything but a good temper.

That evening, as I was dreaming at my window, — a habit I had fallen into of late, — my dreams were disturbed by a morbid anxiety, the nature of which I could not very well define. I mused on the incidents of a day that had been looked forward to so impatiently, and I could not get rid of the impression that things had not turned out as I expected. What had I hoped for ? I did not know, but I harangued myself in a long discourse, the object of which was to prove that M. de Conprat was in love with me. The peroration, however, ended in tears, and this was, surely, a bad omen.

Nevertheless, my uneasiness vanished the next morning entirely. In the afternoon I received a long letter from my curé ; it was full of good advice, and concluded as follows :

“Your letter, my dear child, has been a great consolation and a great joy to me in my loneliness. Do not grow tired of writing to me, I entreat you. I do not know what is to become of me without you, and I do not dare

to go to Le Buisson for fear of crying like a child. I am ashamed of my selfishness, though, for you are happy; but, as the Scripture says, the flesh is weak, and I have not yet been able to find consolation in my presbytery, my duties and prayers.

“Adieu, my dear little child; my last words to you will be: Distrust the imagination.”

And this phrase produced an unpleasant impression on my disturbed mind.

CHAPTER XI.

I WAS now three weeks at Pavol, and my uncle maintained I had improved so much in my looks that the curé, should he meet me, would never be able to recognize me. He compared me to some hardy plant that, owing to its own intrinsic force, thrives in a barren soil, but that attains the full development of its beauty, in a sudden and marvellous manner, when transplanted to a region more in harmony with its nature.

A look in my glass was sufficient to convince me that this was true, that my brown eyes had a new lustre and my lips were fresher

than ever before; my rather southern complexion, too, had assumed a delicate rose tint that was enough of itself to put me in high good humor.

However, a few days after the lunch of which I have spoken I made a discovery that proved decisively how grossly I was misled by my simplicity in thinking M. de Conprat to be in love with me. But I have never been a pessimist, and I made all haste to provide myself with arguments that would be likely to afford me consolation. I said to myself that all hearts were not made alike, and that while some surrender in a minute, there are others which claim the right of reflecting and observing before taking fire; that though M. de Conprat might not love me now, he must love me some day or other, seeing that our tastes and proclivities were in such perfect unison. Consequently, serious as was my disappointment, my tranquillity was not greatly troubled for several days. I brightened up more and more amid surroundings so congenial to my nature, and basked in the light of my happiness like a lizard in the sunshine.

My cousin was a fine musician, and the major, who adored music, came to Pavol

several times a week, always accompanied by his son, who was warmly welcomed on other occasions as well, both on account of the intimacy existing between him and Blanche since childhood and the ties of relationship that united the families. My uncle regarded this intimacy with satisfaction, for, in spite of his paradoxes on marriage, he was extremely desirous of an alliance between his daughter and M. de Conprat, who, in his eyes, was clearly one of the unobjectionables, and the major was in hearty sympathy with the project.

I learned this later on, and found out a good many other things besides, which I might have easily discovered sooner had I been possessed of a little more experience.

As a general rule these gentlemen arrived in time for lunch. That Paul, whose appetite we are already acquainted with, did full justice to the repast may be taken for granted. He followed it up with a substantial collation about three. Then, if we had no other visitors, Blanche gave me a dancing lesson, during which he played a waltz of his own composition with great spirit. Sometimes he acted as professor himself, in which case Blanche took his place at the piano, and I whirled round in

the arms of M. de Conprat, fairly speechless with delight, the major and my uncle looking on with considerable enjoyment. Oh, what charming days those were !

We formed no plan in which he was not included. His stimulating gayety, kindly temper, and a talent for organization and for every sort of grotesque inventions which he possessed to perfection, rendered him a charming companion, brightened our lives, and made me more in love with him than ever. At once clever, active, and obliging, he was equally able and willing to do everything. When we broke a watch, a bracelet, or any object whatever, Blanche and I used to say :

“If Paul comes to-day he will repair it.”

He was very fond of painting, and often brought his pictures to show us. It was the only point upon which he and I could not agree. I had an inveterate dislike for the arts, for music especially, because that odious thing etiquette will not allow people to stuff their ears, while no one can force you to look at a picture or hinder you from turning your back on it. And yet, for all that, I could have gladly listened to M. de Conprat's dance tunes as long as he chose to play them ; but it was he I loved in the music, and not the music

itself. I refer to this feeling at the present moment because I analyzed it on a certain day, and this analysis led to a frightful discovery.

“Why do you paint trees, cousin?” I said. “The very ugliest trees are better than those green daubs you put on your canvas.”

“So that is your idea of art, my youthful cousin?”

“Do you not believe that Juno is a thousand times more beautiful than her portrait?”

“I do, most assuredly!”

“And these little blue flowers you are putting on the trees, what kind are they?”

“Why, that is a corner of the sky, cousin!”

I turned round on my heel and cried pathetically:

“O skies, and trees, and nature, how many crimes are committed in your names!”

My uncle had a large number of friends in V—. He was related to most of the families in the country, and kept open house. It happened very seldom that we did not have guests at luncheon or dinner. I had thus a fine opportunity to become acquainted with the customs of society and to learn, as the curé had advised, to reduce my feelings to equilibrium. But I must say my attempts

at reform in this respect were a failure, and I seldom hesitated to give free rein to thoughts and impressions that were often as absurd as they were impudent.

My uncle and Juno, who were very rigid on the subject of social conventions, used to upbraid me in good set terms; it all went in at one ear and out at the other. With a perseverance that must have been really distressing, I never lost an opportunity of committing a blunder or of saying something silly.

"You were very discourteous to Madame A—, Reine."

"In what way, O most hypocritical of Junos? I simply let her know I didn't like her, that was all."

"It was in that very thing you showed your lack of decorum, niece."

"But she is so ugly, uncle! And then, you see, I cannot take to women; they are sarcastic and malicious, and examine you from head to foot, as if you were some queer animal."

"How can you reflect on them for being sarcastic, you who spend your whole time in finding out the ridiculous points in people and mimicking them?"

"Yes, but I am pretty and may do as I like. So M. C— told me the other day."

"I do not quite see the inference. Besides, do you think men don't examine you from head to foot also?"

"Yes, but it is because they admire me, while the women are on the look-out for flaws all the time, and when they don't discover them they invent them. Oh, I know what I'm talking about; I have already noticed a multitude of things."

"That is easily seen, niece, but try to notice, too, that good breeding is a quality of some value."

When our guests of the masculine gender were young they paid their court to Blanche and me, and I amused myself to the top of my bent; but when they were old—my stars, but what a headache I used to get from their politics! Ah, how they and their politics did weary me!

These worthy folk always arrived in a state of great excitement over some misdeeds of the government; they would talk discreetly enough until some fiery Bonapartist cried that he should like to shoot all the Republicans in the country in order to strike them with terror. The childishness of the remark

would probably raise a laugh, but this imaginary massacre was also sure to be the signal for every sort of rigmarole and extravagance. We all rushed head-foremost into politics, and kept in the thick of them until the end of the repast. All were agreed in expressing their detestation of the Republic and Republicans; but when each guest proceeded to pull out of his pocket a little government of his own, which he was always careful to carry round with him, the rest hurled furious glances at him and grew as red as tomatoes. The Legitimist draped himself in the dignity of his traditions, his veneration and reverence for the past, and scorned the Imperialist as a revolutionist; the latter, in his heart, regarded the Legitimist as an idiot, but, as politeness would not allow him to express his opinion, he made up for his enforced self-restraint by shouting like a madman. Then they fell anew on the Republicans, overwhelmed them with invectives, transported, shot, guillotined them, made mince-meat of them; in fact, Bonapartists and Legitimists combined, out of a common hatred, to sweep these unfortunate bipeds off the face of the earth. They declaimed passionately, gesticulated, saved the country, and their faces grew

as red as scarlet — all of which, alas! did not hinder things from jogging along in their appointed course.

In the middle of these incoherent ravings, my uncle would, from time to time, throw out some remark, wise or witty as the case might need, calculated to raise the discussion to a higher level than that of personal interests and individual sympathies. Though by no means a Legitimist, and indeed without any fixed opinions whatever, he was not the less sure on that account that for nearly a century France has been groping her way blindly, and that, as such a situation is not natural for her, she must eventually lose her balance and tumble over a precipice.

He used to laugh at the shabby tricks and follies of the different parties, but he was often in a despondent mood, generally manifested by the utterance of some brighter witicism than usual. I never saw him in a passion. He kept his serenity in the midst of the contradictory bellowings of his guests, sure of having his opinion taken into account at the upshot, for he was judicious and far-sighted. However, his dislikes were keen, and he detested the Republicans. Still, he was by no means one-sided or fanatical; he

would have accepted a republic did he believe a republic possible, and thought highly of the honesty of certain men who were struggling in all sincerity for a Utopia.

I have sometimes heard him call our rulers battledore players, and compare the laws the Chambers were daily sending back and forth to shuttlecocks which gaping Frenchmen look up at as they spin round over their heads with an appearance of innocence until at last they fall on the bridges of their respectable noses, flattening them with a vengeance. And from these observations I deduced certain little principles for my own guidance that shall be mentioned in the proper time and place.

M. de Pavol was fond of conversation and even of argument. Though he spoke little, he was an interested and attentive listener. Under a rustic exterior he concealed an extensive knowledge of many subjects, a sure, refined, and elevated taste, regulated by sound reason and common sense. He was neither a saint nor a bigot.

Like most men, he had, I presume, his weaknesses and failings. But he believed in God, in the soul, and in virtue; and he did not regard scepticism or a fondness for scoffing and sneering as marks of virility and intelli-

gence. He rather liked to listen to materialists and free-thinkers when they unfolded their systems, but the expression of his lips was eloquent as to his sentiments, while he gazed on the speaker from beneath bushy eyebrows that almost concealed his eyes; then he would answer slowly, and with the greatest calmness :

“Morbleu ! but you do arouse my admiration, monsieur. Why, you have really succeeded in attaining the humility preached by the Gospel ! I am ashamed that I am unable to walk in your footsteps, but my confounded pride is so enormous that I fear it will never let me consider myself on a level with the caterpillar that crawls at my feet or the pig that wallows in my back yard.”

He was always at war with the municipal council of his commune, and was not at all partial to the people of the village, for he insisted that the peasant is the most rascally knave in creation. Accordingly, though he was esteemed and respected, he was not liked. Yet he was exceedingly liberal in his charities and did many acts of kindness whenever an opportunity was afforded him, but he never allowed himself to be duped by the low cunning and trickery of our honest farmers.

In a word, though my uncle had not embraced any profession, though he was neither a lawyer, nor a doctor, nor an engineer, though he was not even a minister, he did his work in the world by trying to preserve sound, healthy traditions, by respecting whatever is worthy of respect, by refusing to give way to the insensate delusions of the time, and by influencing certain minds in the direction of righteousness and common sense. I was very fond of him, and if he had never talked politics I should have believed him faultless. It was very easy getting along with him in private life. He fairly worshipped his daughter and rapidly gave proofs of great affection for myself.

“What frightful things governments are!” said I to M. de Conprat. “They ought to be suppressed, every one of them! Then, at least, we should hear no more of politics. There are two things I should like to see go: the piano and politics.”

“Upon my faith, I do not know but I agree with you,” he answered, with a laugh.

“Ah, you do not like the piano? Still, you listen to Blanche with pleasure; at least, you look as if you did.”

“Yes; but then, my cousin Blanche has real talent.”

This explanation produced within me something of that cramping sensation we experience when mosquitoes buzz around us during our slumbers: they worry us without entirely breaking our rest. Clearly the reason he assigned was by no means plausible, because, for all Juno's talent, I, who was as little partial to the piano as he said he was, felt a temptation to scream or run away whenever she executed a sonata of Beethoven or Mozart — two men, by the way, who can well boast of having tired people to death. How their wives must have suffered! It breaks my heart to think of it.

Well, in the midst of a life so agreeable, with its hopes and its little annoyances which vanished before a kind word or were forgotten in the distractions to which I had been unaccustomed, the time passed quickly, and we soon found ourselves at the end of September; and my uncle, with the dismal air of a criminal going to the scaffold, prepared to take us to the parties spoken of by M. de Conprat.

CHAPTER XII.

IT is hardly necessary for me to state that my critical proclivities were suspended during my first ball. The only memories I retain of that night are an intoxicating delight and the number of silly things I must have said, for I was hauled over the coals on account of them the next day.

Now and then Juno tapped me on the arm with her fan and whispered that I was behaving ridiculously. But she might as well have been talking to the wind, and I flew away in my partner's arms, thinking that if waltzing is not permitted in heaven it is scarcely worth while going there.

Sometimes my cavalier believed it necessary to engage me in conversation.

"You have not lived in this country long, mademoiselle?"

"No, monsieur; only about six weeks."

"Where did you reside before coming to Pavol?"

"At Le Buisson, a frightful country, with a frightful aunt who is dead, God be thanked!"

"In any case, your name is pretty well

known, mademoiselle : there was a Chevalier de Lavalie shut up in Mont Saint-Michel, in 1423."

"Dear me ! And what was he doing there ? "

"Why, he was defending the Mount when it was attacked by the English."

"When he might have been dancing ! What a booby he must have been ! "

"And is that the way you value your ancestors and their heroism, mademoiselle ? "

"My ancestors ? I have never given them a thought. As for heroism, I don't care a straw for it."

"Why, what has this poor heroism done to you ? "

"The Romans were heroes, as it seems, and I detest the Romans. But let us waltz instead of chattering."

And we whirled round until my partner was quite done up.

My happiness reached its climax when, in this brilliantly lighted hall, under the eyes of women in their gorgeous evening costumes, in the midst of that fashionable world to which I was such a stranger only a short while before, I found myself waltzing with M. de Conprat. He danced better than any

other person in the room, that was a dead certainty. Although he was so tall and I was so extremely little, his pretty blonde mustache, which was pointed at the ends, now and then grazed my cheek, and I had some little temptations I do not care mentioning, for fear of scandalizing my neighbor.

Fairly intoxicated with joy, as well as with the compliments that buzzed around me, I said many silly things, some of them too silly to be even imagined. But I made a conquest of all the young men and reduced all the young girls to despair.

The german worked me up to the highest pitch of enthusiasm, and when my uncle, who was looking like a martyr in his corner, made us a sign that it was time to leave, I cried from the opposite end of the hall :

“Uncle, you will carry me off only at the point of the bayonet !”

But I was compelled to go, even without the employment of bayonets being rendered necessary, and I followed Juno, who, beautiful and dignified as ever, obeyed her father and paid not the slightest heed to my protests.

As soon as I entered my room I undressed calmly enough ; however, when I had put on

my night-gown and was on the point of getting into bed, a sudden and irresistible fancy took hold of me. I seized my bolster and waltzed round with it, singing at the top of my voice.

Juno, whose room was not far from mine, came in, looking somewhat alarmed.

“Why, what are you doing, Reine?”

“You see — waltzing.”

“Good gracious, what a child you are!”

“My dear, if men and women had any sense they would waltz day and night.”

“Come, now, Reine, it is getting cold and you may catch a chill if you are not careful. Do get into bed, please.”

I threw my bolster into a corner and slipped under the sheets. Blanche sat at the foot of the bed and improvised a harangue. She endeavored to prove that in all our actions calmness should be the guiding principle, that everything ought to be done in the proper place and in the proper season, that, when all was said and done, a bolster could not be a very agreeable partner, and that —

“Oh, I am quite of your opinion!” said I, interrupting her quickly; “the only partners of any account are the partners in flesh and blood, especially when they have mustaches,

and, above all, when their mustaches are blonde ! A little mustache that tickles your cheek while waltzing, ah ! it is delight — ”

Whereupon I fell asleep and did not awake until three o'clock the next afternoon.

When I was dressed M. de Pavol intimated through a servant that he should like to see me. I complied at once with this invitation, although I was pretty sure I was in for a lecture. From his solemn aspect I could see that my conjecture was correct, and as I have always been fond of my ease while listening to a sermon as well as on other occasions, I pushed an arm-chair forward and lay back comfortably in it ; I crossed my hands on my knees and closed my eyes, waiting for what was to follow in an attitude of profound attention.

At the end of a couple of seconds, as I heard nothing, I said :

“ Well, uncle, why don't you begin ? ”

“ Oblige me by sitting up, Reine, and assuming a more respectful attitude.”

“ But, uncle,” said I, opening my eyes in amazement, “ I had not the slightest intention of being disrespectful. If I have taken an attitude indicative of serious thought, I have done so with the object of paying closer attention to what you may say.”

"Niece, I firmly believe you will drive me crazy !"

"That's quite likely, uncle," I answered tranquilly ; "my curé has often told me I should be the death of him."

"Indeed ! And do you really believe I am inclined to go to the devil for the sake of an unmannerly girl ?"

"In the first place, uncle, I hope you'll never go to the devil, much as you seem to like that personage, to judge by your using his name so often ; and in the second, I should be in despair if I lost you, for I love you with all my heart."

"Hum ! that, of course, is all very well ; but will you do me the favor of informing me why, after all my instruction and advice, you behaved with such scandalous impropriety last night ?"

"Give the details and particulars of your indictment, uncle."

"It would take too long, for everything you did was ill done ; you were, for all the world, like a young colt let loose. Among your other follies, the very moment you saw M. de Conprat you called him by his Christian name. I was near you, and I could see your partner was surprised beyond measure."

"I believe you! He looked like a goose!"

"I am not a goose, Reine, and I regard your conduct as highly improper."

"But, uncle, he is our cousin; we see him almost every day. Blanche and I call him Paul whenever we talk of him, and often when we speak to him directly."

"That may be allowable at home, but not in society, where every one is not bound to know the different degrees of relationship and kindred between people."

"And so a person must act one way at home and another in society?"

"That is a fact of which I have been doing all in my power to convince you, niece."

"But it's nothing more or less than sheer hypocrisy!"

"Then, in the name of Heaven, be a hypocrite! That is all I ask of you! Moreover, it appears you told five or six young men they were very attractive."

"And it was the naked truth!" I cried, in a sudden burst of sympathy for my partners; "they were so polite, so charming, and so eager to please me! Besides, I had got so confused as to what dances I had promised that I was afraid the young gentlemen might be annoyed."

“Meanwhile, you have annoyed me, annoyed me excessively, Reine. For the last seven weeks Blanche and I have been doing our best to teach you to regulate your words and actions according to a certain standard, and, notwithstanding all our efforts, you never miss an opportunity of saying or doing something foolish. You are witty, coquettish, and, unfortunately for me, your face is ten times prettier than it ought to be, and” —

“Go on!” I cried. “That’s something like talking! That’s the kind of sermon I like listening to!”

“Reine, don’t interrupt me, I am speaking seriously.”

“Come now, uncle, let us reason the matter out. The first time you saw me you said: ‘You are devilish pretty!’”

“And what follows, niece?”

“It follows, uncle, that one cannot always control one’s first impulses.”

“Possibly; but you ought to endeavor to do so, and above all, you ought to heed my words. In spite of your extreme youth and small stature, you look like a woman; try, then, to acquire some of that dignity that befits a woman.”

“Dignity?” I exclaimed in astonishment; “what have I to do with dignity?”

“What have you to do with dignity? What do you mean?”

“I don’t understand, uncle. Here you are preaching dignity to me when the government has so little!”

“I do not grasp the connection. What new fancy is this of yours?”

“Why, uncle, you have been proving that the government spends all its time playing at battledore; now, in sober earnest, a government that does that has very little dignity. How, then, can you expect more dignity from a private individual than from ministers and senators?”

My uncle burst out laughing.

“I might as well give up scolding you, Reine, you slip through one’s fingers like an eel. But however that may be, you may rest assured you cannot go to any more parties until you pay attention to what I say.”

“Oh, uncle, if you did such a thing as that you would deserve all the tortures of the Inquisition!”

“As the Inquisition happens to be abolished, I stand in no danger of torture. Reine, you make your mind up that you must obey

me. I do not propose to allow my niece to fall into habits which, though they may be pardoned at present on account of her youth, would cause her to be regarded later on as a — hem !”

“As a what, uncle ?”

Here M. de Pavol had a violent fit of coughing.

“As a woman reared in a wilderness, or something like it.”

“And that would not be so wide of the mark, either ! Le Buisson was for all the world like a wilderness.”

“Well, well, niece, I think you had better take it to heart that I am now talking seriously. You can retire and turn the matter over in your mind.”

This time I saw that the stern lecture in which I had been brought to book was anything but a joke. I shut myself up in my room and pouted for a good twenty-eight and a half minutes. Still, I felt that there was a faint but praiseworthy desire springing up in my soul to regulate my conduct according to the standard adopted by my uncle and cousin.

CHAPTER XIII.

I SOON found out that proverbs sometimes make good their claim to wisdom, that where there's a will there's a way, and that, if I set my heart on it, there was nothing to hinder me from giving practical effect to the counsels of my uncle. I do not wish to imply that I committed no more follies; oh, no, not by any means! they were still of rather frequent occurrence, but I became more temperate and forbearing, and acquired a composure that was, relatively, chastened and serene.

I may add that though my uncle had scolded me, he had done so, as he said himself, only with the object of putting me on my guard in the future, for I was living in a circle that viewed my words and actions with the greatest indulgence, a circle distinguished for good breeding, politeness, and courteous traditions, and a circle, too, in which I was surprised to discover quite a number of friends and connections.

Thanks to my name, my beauty, and my dowry, many of my sins against decorum were forgiven me. I became the pet of

dowagers, who obligingly related anecdotes of my great-grandparents and of others of my forefathers whose valorous exploits must have been exceedingly remarkable, or these amiable and high-born ladies would not have spoken of them so warmly. It gave me considerable satisfaction to learn that ancestors have their uses, and can cover with their dusty ægis the pertness and extravagance of such of their youthful descendants as have issued from the depths of a wilderness.

I was also the favorite of prospective husbands, who beheld the brightness of my dowry reflected in my sparkling eyes; the favorite of my partners, who were highly amused by my coquetry, and I will confess, but in a whisper, with bated breath, that it delighted me beyond measure to break the hearts and turn the heads of certain individuals.

O coquetry, what a hidden charm there is in every letter of thy name!

Surely my aptitude for the art must have been born and bred in me; after two or three evenings I had all its details and stratagems and variations at my fingers' ends.

I should like to be a preacher, just to have an opportunity to preach coquetry to my con-

gregation, and to have it in my power to withhold absolution from those among my penitents who were so senseless as to refuse to devote themselves to this charming pastime.

Perhaps I might not be allowed to remain very long in the fold of the Church; but, however short my career, I fancy I should make some proselytes. I pity men who believing they know everything, are yet ignorant of the choicest and most delicate pleasures. In my eyes they do not live, they simply vegetate.

But while I was up to the ears in all kinds of bustle and excitement, and was trampling hearts under my feet, Blanche passed through our midst, haughty and beautiful, too sure of her loveliness to think it necessary to take the trouble of pleasing, too dignified to descend to the wiles and outbursts in which I delighted.

Still, when the ardor of my first transports was somewhat allayed, the reflection soon occurred to my mind that it was taking M. de Conprat a very long time to fall in love with me. He saw me under all aspects, in full dress and undress, saw me in every sort of mood, coquettish, grave, sometimes melan-

choly, — though not often, I must confess, — and, in spite of these different phases, which proved, at least, there was nothing monotonous about me, he not only declined to make a declaration, but really appeared to treat me as a child. The words of the curé: “You may be sure he looks on you as a little girl, of no account,” began to trouble me greatly.

In the midst of all my pleasures and amusements and coquetry my love never wavered for a moment. No doubt the excitement in which I lived kept me from having my thoughts always fixed on it, and this it is that accounts for my long blindness; but it never came into my mind that I could find a more charming man than Paul de Conprat.

And yet, in the court that so eagerly pressed around me, there were several courtiers who bore a strong resemblance to the types I so much admired in Sir Walter Scott. I often asked myself how came it to pass that this plump hero of mine, with the jovial face and the marvellous appetite, had been able to gain such a mastery over my soul at the very time it was under the influence of imaginary personages to whom he bore no resemblance whatever. It is a psychological problem the solution of which I leave to the philosophers,

because, as for myself, I have no time to attend to it; I simply state the fact, make my courtesy to philosophy, and pass on.

We had our last party on the 25th of October, at a château near Pavol. I wore a dress of vaporous blue, with two or three knots of ribbon fastened in my dark hair and falling over one ear. I was more than usually pretty on this occasion, and had a tremendous success; a success, indeed, of such a serious character that during the following week my uncle received five offers for my hand. But for all that I was restless, feverish, and uneasy, and, contrary to my usual habit, I did not enjoy the admiration kindled by my beauty. I was waiting impatiently for M. de Conprat, for I was anxious to watch him with eyes that were now beginning to see things with some clearness. He generally came in very late, with three or four young gentlemen belonging to the ultra-fashionable set of the neighborhood. These fastidious individuals had lost all relish for gayety from their tenderest years, and, as they considered it absolutely wearisome and distressing to have to waltz with pretty women, they proffered their requests in a bored, careless style that was decidedly impertinent. But Paul de Conprat

was an exception; he was too honest and natural not to dance with the sprightliness and good humor demanded by the occasion. Nevertheless I may as well confess that my high spirits quickly dispelled the ennui of these unhappy victims of experience, as an unclouded sun dispels a thin mist. I knew so well how to rouse and excite them, and to make them veer round to whatever point my caprice suggested, that my uncle said: "That girl is possessed!"

Evil be to him who evil thinks!

It vexed me to notice that Paul waltzed so often with Blanche, while he seldom gave me an invitation, and was not very ceremonious or eager about it when he did. I hoped to attract his attention by flirting harder than ever. But he troubled his head very little about me; his heart and mind were evidently fixed on something else, and I took refuge in a retired corner, declining resolutely to dance any longer.

I had been for some time concealed among the hangings that separated the ball-room from a boudoir in which a number of women were seated, when I overheard the conversation of two respectable dowagers whose affection I had captured.

“Reine is perfectly charming to-night ; she has had her usual success, too.”

“Still, Blanche de Pavol is more beautiful.”

“Yes, but not so fascinating. She is a disdainful queen, while Mademoiselle de Laval is an adorable little princess who looks as if she had just stepped out of a fairy tale.”

“The word ‘princess’ suits her exactly ; she comes of a fine old stock and shows it. What would scandalize you in another becomes charming in her.”

“They say a marriage has been arranged between her cousin and M. de Conprat.”

“So I have heard.”

During some seconds, orchestra, dowagers, and dancers spun round me in a dance to which I cannot give a name, and, to avoid falling, I clutched at the draperies in which I was ensconced.

When I recovered from my lethargy that brilliant ball-room seemed as if it were veiled in heavy crape ; to Juno’s intense surprise, I begged her to leave at once, without waiting for the german.

After returning to Pavol I said to myself : “It is not true, I am sure it cannot be true ! Why should I be so much troubled ? ”

But I wept bitterly while I was undress-

ing, for I had a presentiment that a terrible misfortune was about to fall upon me. Nevertheless, as there is nothing in the world so volatile as the mind of a girl at sixteen, my hopes revived the next morning and I was inclined to regard the babble of these ladies as mere idle gossip. I resolved to pay close attention to M. de Conprat, for I was determined to note any signs, no matter how trivial, that might serve to substantiate even such of my impressions as were past and evanescent.

On the afternoon of that luckless day we were all in the drawing-room. The major and my uncle were absorbed in a game of chess, Blanche was playing a sonata of Beethoven, and I, leaning back in an arm-chair, was watching Paul de Conprat through my half-closed eyelids. He had taken a seat near the piano, just a little behind Juno, and was listening with an air of great gravity, while his gaze was riveted on her face all the time. It struck me that this air of gravity did not suit him at all and resembled lassitude more than anything else. I was confirmed in this impression by noticing his efforts to stifle some unseasonable yawns. It was then that the full meaning of the pleasure I took in his own

playing burst upon me. I saw it was not the airs that took my fancy, but the performer, and I understood now that Paul was moved by that very same feeling. Much he cared for Beethoven, indeed! it was Blanche he cared for, and the things he least relished pleased him in the woman he loved.

Juno's frightful sonata came to an end at last, and Paul exclaimed with an enthusiasm the hidden meaning of which was plain to me:

"What a master Beethoven is! and how perfectly you interpret him, cousin!"

"You yawned!" I cried, leaping so suddenly to my feet that the chess-players uttered a growl of anger.

"I thought you were asleep, Reine."

"No, I was not asleep, and I tell you Paul yawned while you were playing your abominable Beethoven."

"Reine has such an aversion to music," remarked my uncle, "that she credits others with her own ideas."

"Yes, and my ideas have made some fine discoveries!" I answered in a trembling voice.

"Why, what in the world ails you, Reine? Did you sleep badly last night that you are in such a temper?"

“I am not in a temper, Juno, but I detest hypocrisy, and I maintain, and will maintain to my dying day, that Paul yawned and yawned. There!”

After this outbreak I took to my heels, leaving the occupants of the drawing-room in a state of dismay.

I locked myself in my room and strode up and down the floor, cursing my blindness and thumping my head with my fist, as was the manner of Perrine in any difficulty. But thumps on the head — apart from the fact that they may unsettle the brain — have never yet served as a remedy for an ill-starred love, and yielding to a feeling of utter despair I dropped into an easy-chair, in which I remained long, shivering and heart-broken.

As is the case in all circumstances of this nature, I remembered words and details that ought, I said to myself, to have enlightened me twenty times for the one in which I might have been mistaken. Among many other indistinct feelings there was one that predominated: it was that of bitter rage, and, in my newly awakened and outraged pride, I vowed that never, never should I allow any one to perceive the cause of my misery. I was sincere in this, and I firmly believed it would

be easy for me to hide my impressions, although I had been rather in the habit of hurling them at the heads of my acquaintances. I was passing through one of those moments of irritation during which the most even-tempered individual has a violent desire to strangle some one or to break something. My nervous excitement, which tears were unable to relieve, absolutely needed some sort of outlet, and I fell into a passion with my little terra-cotta men, whose grimaces and smiles suddenly struck me as odious and ridiculous. I at once seized them and flung them through the window, experiencing a fierce pleasure as the noise they made when dashed to pieces on the gravel of the avenue reached my ear. But my uncle happened to be passing under my window at the time and received some of them on his venerated head, upon which, luckily, he had his hat. He evidently regarded my behavior as a more serious breach of the laws of etiquette than any that had occurred heretofore, as was manifested by the energy of the expressions employed in its denunciation.

“—! and what the devil are you at there, niece?”

“I am throwing my little men out of the

window, uncle," I answered, approaching the casement, from which I had stood away so as to fling my projectiles with more force.

"And is that any ground for breaking my head?"

"I beg your pardon, uncle, but I did not see you."

"Have you gone mad of a sudden, niece? What do you mean by smashing those gim-crack ornaments of yours?"

"They set my teeth on edge, uncle; they unnerve, they infuriate me! Hold! Here go the last of them!"

I hurled five of them out together, and, abruptly closing the window, I left M. de Pavol to storm away at nieces and their whims and at the disorder of his avenue.

He read me a lecture in the evening, which I listened to with the greatest unconcern. What was a wretched lecture to me in the midst of my sorrows and anxieties? It produced about as much effect as the bursting of a soap-bubble over my head.

After dinner I went to gaze upon my little men that were strewn over the avenue; they had quite a piteous air as they lay there, shattered, pulverized, like the hopes and illusions that I thought were now lost forever!

CHAPTER XIV.

PERHAPS my lack of discernment may create surprise; but where is the person who, without having the excuse of my sixteen years, has not at least once in life given proof of incredible blindness? I should be very glad to discover the man who has not called himself an idiot on stumbling upon some fact long unnoticed by him, although it was visible all the time. Ah, yes! it is very easy to have discernment; very easy to prove you have it when facts stare you in the face.

It was regular agony for me now to keep a watch on M. de Conprat and to observe all the delicate attentions he paid to Blanche, knowing as well as I did the secret motives that were at the bottom of every one of them. How I wept in secret! And yet I believe I really never felt particularly jealous of Juno. Good heavens, no! I was simply a little thing who loved deeply and sincerely, but not the slightest shadow of lawless passion ever mingled with my love. Only I was in a condition of perpetual irritation with M. de Conprat. I made him the scapegoat of my bad temper, my secret sorrows and

grievances. I never stopped worrying him and addressing remarks to him that were outwardly polite, but concealed a hidden sting. Then I usually hurried to my room, where I harangued myself in somewhat the following fashion while striding up and down the floor :

“How very clever of him, indeed! — to lose his heart to a woman who is no more like him than a dock is like a daisy! He so merry and chatty, quite as chatty as I am myself, beyond a doubt! and she so grave, so silent, and such a stickler for etiquette, a thing that often bores him to death, if I know what I’m talking about. Why, we understood each other to perfection! How is it he has n’t seen that? Still, Blanche is as good as she is beautiful; he has known her long, and, when all is said and done, no one is master of his affections.”

However, these fine arguments did not give me a great deal of consolation.

I sobbed as soon as I went to bed, sometimes continued sobbing most of the night, and in spite of my firm determination to hide my feelings, before a fortnight elapsed every one in Pavol — whether guest or inmate — was astounded at my whims and caprices.

In the morning I was sometimes so gay that I laughed entire hours; in the evening I sat down to dinner, looking as gloomy as possible, and was as mute as a fish during the entire repast.

A silence so unusual in my case alarmed M. de Pavol exceedingly.

"What is running in your little head, Reine?"

"Nothing, uncle."

"Perhaps you are fagged out. How would you like to take a trip somewhere?"

"Oh, no, no, uncle; it would break my heart to leave Pavol."

"If you are anxious to marry, Reine, you are free to do so; I am not a tyrant. You are not sorry you rejected all the offers that have been coming on top of one another for some time?"

"No, uncle, I have given up that idea entirely; I do not wish to marry."

These unfortunate offers also added to my misery. The mere mention of marriage made me feel like bursting into tears. Though M. de Pavol did not exercise any pressure on me he laid before me the advantages of the several matches, and was rather persistent in requiring me to become at least acquainted with my

various suitors. He would not have been far wrong in describing each of them as "unobjectionable," and, among the numerous discoveries I was making daily, that of my uncle's inconsistency was not the least astonishing. Deep down in his heart there was, I think, some feeling of apprehension in connection with the charge for which he had made himself responsible. But he left me entirely free, and was content to accept my reasons for refusing certain offers, reasons which, to tell the truth, were utterly absurd.

"Why did you tell us so often, Reine, that you were in a hurry to get married?" inquired Blanche.

"I don't intend marrying until I find what I want."

"Indeed! And pray what is it you want?"

"I don't know — yet," I answered, with a break in the voice.

Blanche took my face between her hands and scrutinized me attentively.

"I wish I could read your thoughts, my little Reine. Are you in love with any one? With Paul?"

"I give you my solemn word I am not," I said, freeing myself from her hands; "I am

in love with nobody, and when I am you shall know all about it at once."

If death were not so frightful I am sure I should allow myself to be killed sooner than confess my love for a man who loved another woman, especially as this woman was my own cousin. Fortunately, there was no question of my death, either by impalement or guillotine; if there had been, my stoicism would have probably wilted immediately.

"I am simply doing as you are doing, Blanche; I am waiting."

"I have not the same success as my wild little country maiden from Le Buisson," she answered, with a smile. "Five offers of marriage on the same day!"

"Please don't talk about it; the mere mention of it wearies and disgusts me!"

Unfortunately, a sixth suitor, with a combination of the rarest and most extraordinary perfections, suddenly entered the ranks of my adorers. Alas! I was reaping what I had sown, for, on my very first appearance in society, I took care to inform everybody of my intention to get married at the earliest possible moment.

My uncle sent for me and we had a long conversation.

“Reine, M. Le Maltour solicits the honor of asking you in marriage.”

“Much good may it do him, uncle !”

“He does n’t please you, does he ?”

“Not at all.”

“And why ? Give me a few reasons, and let them be good ones ; those you mentioned the other day in connection with the gentlemen you rejected so curtly were simply worthless.”

“Those gentlemen of yours were not presentable, uncle !”

“Oh, nonsense, Reine ! Surely M. de P — was not amiss.”

“A man of thirty, uncle ! Why not marry me to a patriarch at once ?”

“Well, what about M. C — ?”

“But his name is so vulgar, uncle !”

“Then there is M. de N —, a fine young fellow and remarkably intelligent ; what have you to say to him ?”

“Think of a man having only fourteen hairs left on his head at the age of twenty-six ! I counted them, uncle.”

“Hem ! — and little D — ?”

“I do not like brown men. Besides, he is a perfect cipher. Once married, he would adore his face, his neckties, and my money ; that’s all there’s to him !”

“I abandon him to your tender mercies. But, to return to Baron Le Maltour, what charge can you bring against him?”

“A man who refused to dance anything but quadrilles with me because I cannot dance the waltz *à trois temps*!” I cried, with indignation.

“A serious offence, that! Although I say again that I think it absurd for any one to marry at your age, still, in spite of your beauty and your dowry, you may be a long time before you find a person who is so suited in every respect to be your husband as Baron Le Maltour. He is a charming gentleman, and I have received the very best accounts of his morals and character; an immense fortune, a title, a very ancient and honorable family, a” —

“Oh, yes, of course, ancestors! as Blanche says,” I interrupted scornfully. “I have a horror of ancestors, uncle.”

“And may I ask why?”

“People who used to think of nothing but quarrelling and getting their heads broken! What foolishness!”

“Be it as you wish, then! I know the clerk of the court at V — believes you to be a most attractive girl; he has no ancestors. Shall

we inform him that Mademoiselle de Laval is desirous of marrying him on that account ? ”

“ Please don’t be sarcastic, uncle ; you know that I am a patrician to the very tips of my fingers,” taking advantage of the opportunity to admire my little hand and the tips of these same slender fingers.

“ So I should be inclined to believe, unless your appearance is a deception. And now, niece, pay close heed to my words. You are not well enough acquainted with M. Le Maltour to be able to form any judgment as to his disposition, and I have decided that you must see him several times before giving a final answer. I shall write to Madame Le Maltour that, while the matter ultimately rests with you, I authorize her son to visit Pavol whenever he is so inclined.”

“ Very well, uncle, it shall be as you desire.”

Five minutes afterwards I was rambling through the woods, a prey to the most violent agitation.

“ Ah ! ” said I, biting my handkerchief to stifle my sobs, “ things are coming to a pretty pass ! He ’ll get a nice reception, this Maltour will ! It will take me just four days to be rid of him — And my uncle, who sees nothing, who understands nothing ” —

There was where I was mistaken. My uncle, notwithstanding my ostentatious attempts at dissimulation, saw clearly enough, but he was acting with great prudence. He could not hinder M. de Conprat from falling in love with his daughter, nor could he give up the idea, either, of an alliance upon which both he and the major had set their hearts for a long time past. Moreover, being thoroughly convinced that there was little depth and much childishness in this attachment of mine, he imagined the best way to cure me of my infatuation was to turn my thoughts in the direction of a man who, by virtue of his love for me, would succeed in winning my love also, in accordance with the axiom that "love attracts love."

The reasoning would have been perfect if it had not been based on false premises.

Two days later, Madame Le Maltour and her son arrived, both of them looking hopeful and smiling. The worthy lady made me the most friendly advances, all of which I received with the moroseness of a Jesuit porter.

The baron was a most exemplary young man — please do not jump at conclusions; I do not imply by this that he was a simpleton, not by any manner of means! On the con-

trary, he was clever and intelligent. However, he was only twenty-three, and was timid and very much in love, qualities which did not tend to brighten his intellect, but which it would be ungracious for me to criticise.

The next day he came to see us without his mother, and did his best to engage me in conversation.

“Do you regret there are no more evening parties, mademoiselle?”

“Yes,” I replied in a tone as surly as Suzon’s.

“Did you enjoy the party given the other day by the — s?”

“No.”

“And yet it was brilliant. By the way, what a pretty dress you wore! You are fond of blue?”

“Evidently, or I should n’t have put it on.”

M. Le Maltour coughed discreetly to give himself courage.

“Are you fond of travelling, mademoiselle?”

“No.”

“I am astonished at that! I imagined you had just that high-spirited disposition that takes naturally to travelling.”

“All nonsense! I am afraid of everything.”

The conversation continued for some time in this tone. Disconcerted by my curt answers, as well as by the interest I took in the progress of a fly that was walking along the arm of my chair, and by my airs of impertinence generally, the baron rose with a somewhat flushed countenance and cut short his visit.

My uncle escorted him as far as the garden gate, and returned in a towering passion.

"This cannot continue, Reine," he said. "By heavens! when you insulted that poor boy whom you have been trampling upon, you insulted me as well. M. Le Maltour is not the sort of man you can treat as a gull, my fine niece. No one is forcing you to marry him, but I require you to be amiable and courteous. God knows you have the gift of the gab when you like! Let me see that you have it to-morrow. M. Le Maltour is to lunch with us."

"Very well, uncle, you need not be uneasy. I will talk."

"Not nonsense, though, I hope."

"I will draw my inspiration from science, uncle," I replied majestically.

"You will draw your" —

"Be not alarmed, my good uncle, I will do

what you desire, I will speak right on, with never a pause."

"However, niece, that is not exactly what I" —

But I let my uncle confide his thoughts to the furniture of the drawing-room, and hurried to the library in search of material needed to carry out an idea that had just flashed through my brain. I took away with me the "Philosophy of Malbranche," and a work on Tartary.

Malbranche nearly affected me with a rush of blood to the head, and I abandoned him to pounce upon Tartary, which offered me more resources. I studied a few pages closely until midnight, all the time grumbling and fuming at the inhabitants of Bokhara with their uncouth appellations. I was successful, however, in storing my mind with some details, and with a few queer words, the meaning of which I missed entirely. I got into bed, rubbing my hands gleefully.

"We'll see," I said to myself, "whether Le Maltour will resist this trial. Ah, my worthy uncle, I'll have it all my own way, you may depend on it! and, before many hours go by, I shall make a clean sweep of this intruder."

The baron made his appearance the next

day, having the pleasing but somewhat ungainly attitude of a person who is walking upon eggs. However, I received him so graciously that he became quite natural after a time, and the anxiety of M. de Pavol vanished.

The De Conprats and the curé lunched with us. The sight of Paul chatting gayly with Blanche wrung my heart, especially as I was condemned to endure the timid attentions of M. Le Maltour, whose pretty face made my nerves ache.

"I have changed my opinion since yesterday," I said abruptly; "I am now very fond of travelling."

"I share your taste, mademoiselle, it is the most intellectual of all amusements."

"You have travelled?"

"Yes, a little."

"Are you acquainted with the Ruddars, the Schakirdpisches, the Usbecks, the Tadjics, the Mollahs, the Dehbaschis, the Pendja-Baschis, and the Alemanes?" I said with a rush, making a jumble of races, classes, and dignities.

"What is the meaning of all that?" asked the baron, dumfounded.

"What? Have you never travelled in Tartary?"

“Never, certainly.”

“Never travelled in Tartary ? ” I exclaimed contemptuously. “But, surely, you must know something at least of Nasr-Ullah-Bahadin-Khan-Melic-el-Munemin-Bird-Blac-Bloc and the devil ? ”

I had added a few syllables of my own invention to the name of Nasr-Ullah, with the view of producing greater effect, believing that that worthy individual would hardly rise from his grave to upbraid me.

My uncle and his guests had to bite their lips to avoid laughing, while M. Le Maltour looked absolutely scared. At length Blanche exclaimed :

“Are you getting crazy, Reine ? ”

“Why, no, not at all crazy, my dear. I am simply going to ask the gentleman whether he shares my keen sympathy for Nasr-Ullah, a man who, it appears, had every vice that ever was known. He spent his time in cutting the throats of his neighbors and flinging ambassadors into dungeons where he let them rot ; in a word, he was endowed with every sort of energy and was absolutely ignorant of the meaning of timidity, and timidity, in my opinion, is a horrible defect. And then, his country ! The most delightful country in the

world! All kinds of diseases have full swing there, and if I ever marry it is the very spot I intend to send my husband to. Just only think of it! — consumption, small-pox, black-vomit that continues six months, ulcers, leprosy, and a worm named rischa that gnaws the life out of you; to free yourself from its” —

“That will do, Reine; have the kindness to let us enjoy our food in peace.”

“But what can you expect, uncle? I feel strongly attracted towards Tartary. Do you?” I said, turning to M. Le Maltour.

“What you tell us about it is not very encouraging, mademoiselle.”

“Yes, for people who have no blood in their veins!” I replied disdainfully. “But when I am married I shall go to Tartary.”

“Thank heaven, you will not be your own mistress then, niece!”

“You may take my word for it that I shall be, uncle; I shall always do what I like and never what my husband likes. In any case I shall take him to Bokhara, so that the worms may eat him.”

“What? so that the worms may” — murmured the baron timidly.

“Yes, monsieur, you have heard correctly.

I said, 'so that the worms may eat him,' because, in my eyes, the most charming position in life is that of a widow."

The high and puissant Baron Le Maltour, although sprung from a race of doughty warriors, no longer resisted. Understanding the significance of what lay hidden under these Tartarian crotchets of mine, he departed forthwith and nevermore returned.

My uncle was very angry, but his anger did not move me in the least. I took a turn on my heels and said pithily:

"Uncle, where there's a will there's a way!"

CHAPTER XV.

I HAD kept my promise to the curé at first, and used to write to him twice a week very punctually. This custom of mine used to fill him with such delight, with such a sense of comfort, that when my correspondence became all of a sudden less regular, he was worried and distressed beyond measure.

For a whole fortnight I was so entirely engrossed by my troubles that I did not even let him know I was still in the land of the

living ; then, yielding to his urgent entreaties, I forwarded him certain epistles from which I give the following extracts. They will serve as examples :

“ Man is a stupid animal, M. le Curé, a fact I have just discovered. What are your ideas on the subject, my dear curé ? Propriety be hanged ! I send you a kiss.”

Or :

“ Ah, my poor curé, I am much afraid I have stumbled on the fountain the cold water comes from we were talking about three months ago ! Happiness has no existence ; it is a pit-fall, a fraud, a myth, anything you wish except a reality. Farewell ! — if death did not render us so ugly, I should be in love with death. Yes, in love with death, my curé, — you have read correctly.”

He answered by return of post :

“ My dear child, what do you mean by the tone of your last letters ? Three weeks ago you appeared to be so happy, in all the joy and glory of your social success ! No, no, my little Reine, happiness is no myth, and you will have your full share of it before long ; but at the present moment you are entirely in the grasp of your imagination. It has got the better of you and hinders you from seeing things as

they are. You have not followed my advice, Reine. You have lit too many bonfires, have you not? My poor little child, had you not better pay me a visit? We could then have a talk together on our troubles."

To which I answered :

"M. LE CURÉ: The imagination is a block-head, life a rag, the world a tattered garment that may have a brilliant aspect when seen from afar, but, on a nearer view, is discovered to be fit for nothing except to be converted into a scarecrow and frighten the birds from a cherry tree. Ah, my dear curé, how I should like to bury myself in La Trappe! Were I only certain that, at stated intervals, I should be allowed to dance with certain charming partners like some I know, I would certainly seek an asylum within its austere enclosure and hide my youth and beauty in the cloister forever! But if I am not mistaken this method of relaxation is not permitted by the rules of the order. Would you kindly give me some information on this question? Rest assured, M. le Curé, you are little better than an optimist when you assert that happiness exists and is destined to be my portion. You live like the rat in the cheese, M. le Curé. Not that there is a bit of egotism in your nature,

but you are totally unconscious of the catastrophes that may come swooping down on the heads of those who are compelled to live in society.

“I have lost all my illusions, my good curé. I am an honest little old woman, cramped and stunted and withered, — morally, of course, for, otherwise, I am prettier than ever, — a little old woman, my curé, who no longer believes or hopes, and who wonders sadly at the stolidity of a world that continues to roll on after her dearest joys and dreams have been crushed, pulverized, reduced to imperceptible atoms. My moral personality, if it could be stripped bare of that fleshly vesture which deceives the eyes of the observer, and naturally deceives them, I freely admit, — my moral personality, I repeat, is but a skeleton, a tree that is dead ; ah, yes ! — dead, dead ! a sapless tree that is denuded of all its foliage, and uplifts to the heavens its huge but bony and rigid arms. But, oh, M. le Curé, what if my physical personality were to be engulfed in the same abyss in which my moral personality is swallowed ! I tremble to think of it ! Not to have a solitary illusion left me at the age of sixteen ! Oh, it is terrible !

“Farewell, my old curé.”

Two days after the dispatch of this epistle, which must have given the curé a rather sad idea of the condition of my soul, my uncle decided we should spend an afternoon at Mont Saint-Michel.

On that day I had a sinister presentiment that some wind of evil was sweeping along through the atmosphere. During the evening before, the major and M. de Pavol had held a secret and prolonged conversation; Paul seemed restless and nervous, and my cousin dreamy.

My uncle and Juno, who were passionately fond of Mont Saint-Michel, took a good deal of pleasure in showing me through it; but, apart from the fact that I care very little about architecture, I viewed everything through the gloomy veil of a temper that had become positively waspish.

"How wearisome it is, climbing all these flights!" I said, with a groan at every step.

"We must scale some six hundred more of them before we reach the summit, cousin."

"I had rather stop where I am, then!"

"Come along, niece; what the devil ails you? You have n't got the gout?"

And my uncle, while mounting the steps that had been trodden by so many generations,

related the history of the Mount, and the story of Montgomery. But great store, indeed, I set by this Montgomery, and the immense halls, and the marvellous abbey, and the multitude of memories that have been slumbering there for centuries ! I would have taken good care not to awake them even if I could, for I felt a hundred times more interest in observing the countenance of yon stout boy who was as attentive to Blanche as he possibly could be, and never thought of me at all.

How stupid it was of me not to have guessed his love for her earlier ! He fell into raptures over the smallest stone in the building, because he knew his enthusiasm would please her, and from time to time I darted some black looks at him, of which he did not condescend to take the slightest notice.

“Ah ! We are now in the Hall of the Knights. Well, Reine, what do you think of it ? ”

“I think, uncle, that if the knights were present there might be something worth looking at.”

“So you don't think it is worth looking at for its own sake ? ”

“Not in the slightest. I see big chimneys, and pillars with little figures carved on them

at the top, but without the knights, whose heads one might turn just a little — pooh! the whole thing has no meaning at all.”

“It has never occurred to me that this was another way of viewing feudal architecture,” said my uncle, laughing.

We passed through gloomy corridors which frightened me.

“We are going to break our necks, for sure!” I groaned, grasping the arm of the major, while Paul offered his to Blanche.

“Has anything annoyed you, my little Reine?” whispered the major.

“You talk just as my curé used to do,” I answered, with some emotion.

“Come, now, would you like to confide in me?”

“I am not annoyed,” I answered crossly, “and I do not care to confide in anybody. Suzon told me that men were as bad as bad can be, and I am of Suzon’s opinion.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the major, looking at me in such kindly fashion that I was afraid I should have to sob; “such misanthropy in one so young!”

I did not answer, and when we reached a sort of terrace I escaped and hid behind an enormous arcade. I leaned my head on one

of the stones that had been there for ages, and burst into tears.

“Ah!” I thought, “how truly my curé spoke when he said—oh, so long ago!—that we cannot argue with life, but must submit to it! All my logic is useless when I am confronted by circumstances. How sad it is, how very sad, to see one’s self treated as a little girl of no account whatever!”

And I gazed, through my tears, at those much vaunted strands, which wore, in my eyes, an aspect of utter desolation, and on this monument whose height crushed me and made me dizzy; but, without being able to account for the sensation, I felt a sort of consolation in the mysterious affinity of my gloomy surroundings with my own thoughts; in the contemplation of those mighty walls which cast their huge and melancholy shadows over the past, as well as over the earth beneath them.

On our way homeward in the train my uncle said:

“Well, Reine, what impression, on the whole, did Mont Saint-Michel make on you?”

“I think, uncle, it’s a place you’d be sure to die of fright in, and catch the rheumatism besides.”

Along the road that leads from V— station to Pavol, I pondered on the instability of all earthly things. Scarcely three months had elapsed since I traversed the same highway under the influence of my blissful dreams, intoxicated by joyous thoughts that dwelt on that future I believed so fair. And now that same highway seemed strewn with the relics of a vanished happiness.

It was rather late when we arrived at the château; but my uncle carried Blanche away to his room, saying that, late as it was, he must have a serious talk with her.

I retired to rest, weeping bitter tears, convinced that the sword of Damocles was suspended over my head.

For some time Juno had become very friendly and companionable. Every morning she would sit on my bed, and we chatted on a variety of subjects in a vague sort of way. She came into my room at seven the next day, looking as calm and stately as usual, and with that charming smile that quite transfigured her; a smile with which, perhaps, I alone was well acquainted.

“Reine,” she said, “Paul has asked my father for my hand.”

The thread had broken, and the sword of

Damocles fell. What an idiot that king must have been to tie so heavy an object with a mere thread! But, by the way, does not history speak of a hair? History is quite capable of saying such things.

Doubtless I had expected this revelation, but as long as a fact is not proven accomplished, where is the human creature that does not preserve, deep down in its heart, a little hope? I turned very pale, so pale that, although the room was very dark, Blanche perceived it.

“What is the matter, Reine? Are you ill?”

“A cramp,” I murmured feebly.

“Then I’ll go and get some ether,” she said quickly.

“No, no,” I answered, doing my best to hook on to my pride, which was going to the dogs; “it is over, Blanche, entirely over.”

“Does the pain affect you often, Reine?”

“No — just now and then. It is nothing, please don’t speak of it.”

Blanche rubbed her forehead with her hand, like a person who is trying to get rid of some troublesome thought. But I resumed the conversation in so firm a voice that she was, apparently, relieved.

“Well, Juno, what do you intend doing?”

“My father tells me that such a marriage would gratify his fondest wish.”

“But how do you feel yourself about it?”

“Obviously, it is a very good match, suitable in every respect, both in his case and mine. But then, until now I have never thought of Paul except as a cousin.”

“What have you against him?”

“I have nothing against him — unless, perhaps, that I do not like him well enough to marry him. He is a good sort of young fellow, but I do not care particularly for that kind of man. Then, he is not very handsome. And such a voracious appetite! Not much poetry in that, you will admit!”

“Yet it’s very reasonable to eat when you’re hungry,” I answered, keeping back the tears.

“That may be. Still, I am not sure that we exactly suit each other.”

“Then you are going to refuse him, Juno?”

“I have asked a month to make up my mind, one way or the other, Reine. I am greatly disturbed, for I am afraid my father will be disappointed if I refuse. Besides, seen under certain aspects, this marriage ought to combine every advantage I could

desire ; and the man in the case is a very estimable person."

"But if you do not love him, Blanche ?"

"My father holds that I shall love him later on, and that people can marry and live happily together without love, when all is said and done."

"How can you believe it !" I cried, leaping up in my indignation. "In truth, my uncle holds some opinions that are really odious !"

But Blanche answered, coolly, that her father was one of the most sensible of men ; she had often noticed how seldom he was mistaken in his conclusions, and so was rather disposed to obey him.

"Is Paul very fond of you, Juno ?" I mumbled, forcing out the words.

"Yes, he has been so for a long time."

"And you knew it ?"

"Of course ! a woman always knows such things. Did you never perceive it yourself ?"

"Yes — just a little," I replied, with a sad recollection of my stupidity.

Blanche left me, after explaining that Paul had refrained from asking her hand because he dreaded a refusal.

The very thing I thought myself ! And I dressed in feverish haste, for I saw that her

father's influence would prevail on her to consent in the end.

“In her place I should have said ‘yes’ in a second, and, a fortnight afterwards, we would have been married !”

Alas ! it was all over with my dreams, and I sank into a state of utter depression.

CHAPTER XVI.

IT was agreed that Paul should stay away for some time from Pavol, and then a thing occurred which, to my mind, was unheard of, incredible : Blanche, as soon as she was no longer in the habit of seeing him daily, seemed almost decided on marrying him ! He was the constant subject of our conversation, and we had even got so far as to discuss the articles of the trousseau ; my stoical resignation in these circumstances would have done honor to the men of old.

But this resignation was more apparent than real.

I became more depressed than ever, there were blue circles around my eyes, and I began to tell myself that, as life was unendurable

far from the man I loved, the most natural thing for me to do was to pay the debt we all owe to nature at as early a date as possible.

It was, in good sooth, a very painful alternative, but I clutched at the idea with ardor; it became the subject of my profoundest meditations; I fondled it with an almost sickly joy.

Yet I call Heaven to witness that never, never did the thought occur to me of suffocating myself with charcoal or of swallowing poison, as is the fashion with so many of our worthy citizens and citizenesses at the present day. But having read in some book or other that a young girl had died of grief because of a love that had no fruition, I determined to follow her example.

As soon as I had made up my mind on the subject—and I was assisted in this by a decided change for the worse in my appearance—I judged that common politeness, if not a sense of propriety, required me to inform the curé of my momentous resolution, aside from the fact that I felt it impossible to depart without, at least, a farewell grasp of his hand.

The matter being now settled forever, I entered my uncle's study one morning and asked him to let me go to Le Buisson.

"I should much rather, Reine, have you write to the curé to come here."

"He could not, uncle; he never has a sou in his pocket."

"I don't see what pleasure there can be for me in taking you there, niece."

"Please don't come, uncle, you would only bore me. I should like to go alone with the old housekeeper, if you have no objection."

"Well, you can do as you like. My carriage will bring you to C—. There you can easily find some conveyance or other to take you to Le Buisson. When do you start?"

"Early to-morrow morning, uncle. I want to surprise the curé, and I intend sleeping at the presbytery."

"All right, then. But be sure to be at C—the day after to-morrow, at three, or thereabouts."

He looked at me attentively from under his bushy eyebrows, rubbing his chin with an air of absent-mindedness.

"Are you unwell, Reine?"

"No, uncle."

"My dear little niece," said he, drawing me to him, "I am almost beginning to wish that my hopes may not be fulfilled."

I gazed at him in dumb astonishment, for

it had always been my firm belief that he saw nothing.

After a time, I answered, with considerable coolness, that I did not know what he meant, for I was very happy, and it was my sincerest desire that all his plans might be successful. He kissed me affectionately and dismissed me.

I started the next morning, after rejecting the offer of Blanche, who proposed to accompany me.

I reflected on my uncle's words during the journey.

"He knows all," I thought. "Good heavens, what a bungler I am, with all my pretensions! And then, even supposing Juno's marriage fall through, how can that help me, as long as Paul does not love me? He never can love any one else now! I do not understand my uncle."

I no longer believed, as I used to do, that a man could become enamored of several women. Judging by my own feelings, I told myself that the man who can love twice is about the strangest phenomenon the world can produce.

As soon as I had timed the heart-beats of the bearded sex in this fashion, my ideas

took another direction, and I began to feel really happy at the thought of the meeting between the curé and myself. I was resolved to throw my arms around his neck, if it were only to prove my independence and my supreme scorn of etiquette.

When I came to the grounds of the presbytery I did not enter by the gate, but through a gap in the hedge known to me from time immemorial, and I stole with catlike tread to the window of the parlor in which the curé was sure to be now having his breakfast. Although this window was very low, I was so little myself that I was obliged to get up on a log, lying against the wall and used as a bench, to see through it.

I thrust my head through the ivy which ran around the window and almost covered it, and there, before my eyes, was my dear curé.

He was seated at table, eating with an air of great dejection. His honest face had lost a good deal of its coloring and plumpness. His abundant white hair was no longer in a state of disorder, but smoothed down on his head, and this, too, added immensely to the expression of utter gloom betrayed by his whole appearance.

“ Ah, my poor dear curé ! ”

I jumped down from the log, made such a rush for the door that away went my hat, and I darted like a flash of lightning into the room.

The curé started up, aghast, and then his lovable, kindly face actually shone with joy the moment he perceived me. I fell into his arms and wept on his shoulder. Nor did I do so from a desire to violate all the traditions of etiquette either. Oh, no ! my action was prompted by sincere emotion, by an uncontrollable feeling of affection.

I know well that there is nothing in the world so improper as to weep on the shoulder of your curé, and that my uncle and Juno, and all the dowagers of the entire earth, would have forgotten my ancestors and veiled their faces in horror in the presence of a spectacle so scandalous ; my excuse is that I had been too short a time attending lectures in the school of punctilio to be able to stifle completely the impulsiveness of my nature. Besides, I hold for certain that only idiots, and heartless and conceited folk generally, never sacrifice conventionalities to a deep and true emotion.

“ Ah ! my dear curé, life is but a rag, a

wretched rag, my dear curé," I gasped between my sobs.

"And have things gone so hard with you, my dear little child; have they really gone so hard with you? Oh, no, no, it cannot be possible!"

And the poor curé, laughing and weeping at the same time, gazed at me tenderly, passed his hand over my head, and spoke to me as if I were a little wounded bird whose broken wing he would try to heal by caresses and loving words.

"Come, now, Reine; come, my dear child, you must do your best to recover a little calmness," he said, putting me away from him gently.

"You are right, M. le Curé," I answered, thrusting my handkerchief into my pocket. "For three whole months have they been preaching calmness to me, and you see how I have profited by their lectures! Let us have something to eat, M. le Curé."

I took off my gloves and cloak, and, in one of those sudden changes of temper that had become customary with me of late, I burst out laughing, and gayly took my place at the table.

"We'll talk when I have eaten, my dear curé; I am half dead with hunger."

“And I have hardly anything to give you ! ”

“Why, there are beans yonder, and I adore beans ! and your home-made bread is delicious.”

“But you have not come by yourself, Reine ? ”

“Yes, now I think of it, you are right. The housekeeper is perched up in the carriage, behind the church. Send for her, M. le Curé, and tell some one to pick up my hat, which is taking a stroll in the garden.”

The good curé passed out to give his orders, and, on his return, sat down opposite me. While I was eating, with a tolerable appetite, in spite of the state of my lungs and of my bitter woes, he forgot the use of knife and fork altogether, and was gazing at me with an admiration he vainly tried to conceal.

“You think I have grown handsomer than ever, do you not, M. le Curé ? ”

“Well — somewhat, Reine.”

“Ah, my dear curé, if I went to confession now, what big sins I should have to tell you ! Not at all like the little ones of other days, which you know all about.”

And, all the time doing full justice to my repast, I related my vain pleasures, my emo-

tions, toilets, and new ideas. He laughed, took snuff uninterruptedly, with his old air of enjoyment, and kept his eyes fixed on me, with never a thought of scolding me, certainly, entering his head.

“Am I not on the straight road to perdition, M. le Curé?”

“I do not think so, my child. You cannot be blamed for being young while you’re young.”

“Young, my poor curé? Ah, if you could but see into the depths of my soul! I wrote to you that I was now nothing but a skeleton, and it is so true!”

“You don’t look it, at all events.”

“We’ll talk about that in a moment, M. le Curé, and you’ll see!”

When I could eat no more, the servant cleared the table, lit a blazing fire, and we sat down, each in a corner of the fireplace.

“And now let us have a serious conversation, Reine. What have you to tell me?”

I thrust out my little foot to the flame and answered calmly:

“M. le Curé, I am dying.”

The curé, a little startled, abruptly shut the snuff-box, into which he was just about to introduce his fingers.

“No one would think so to look at you, my child.”

“What? do you not mark the heaviness of my eyes, the wanness of my lips?”

“Why, Reine, your lips are ruddy and your face is fairly blooming with health. But of what are you dying?”

Before answering, I looked around, knowing full well I was on the verge of giving utterance to a word to which the wretched walls of this modest apartment had never reëchoed; a word so strange that the venerable and springless clock that stood in a corner, and the pious pictures hanging on the walls, on hearing it, would probably come tumbling down on this devoted head, in a transport of surprise and indignation.

“Well, Reine?”

“Well, M. le Curé, I am dying of love!”

The clock, the pictures, the furniture, all retained their impassive attitude, and the curé only gave an almost imperceptible start.

“I was sure of it,” said he, passing his hand through his hair and ruffling it in the old style, “I was sure of it! Your imagination has been up to its old tricks again, Reine!”

“It is not my imagination but my heart that is in question, since I am in love, M. le Curé!”

“And you so young! such a child!”

“Is that a reason? I repeat I am dying of love, of love for M. de Conprat!”

“Hum! so it’s he, is it?”

“Am I a flighty girl, a mere weathercock, M. le Curé?” I cried with indignation.

“But then, Reine, instead of dying, would it not be better to marry him?”

“That would be the logical conclusion, a conclusion in every way logical, M. le Curé; but, unfortunately, he does not care for me.”

This assertion seemed to him so extraordinary that, for a time, he was too astounded to be able to utter a word.

“It is not possible!” he said at length, in a tone of such conviction that I could not help laughing.

“Not only does he not love me, but he loves another. He is smitten with Blanche, and has asked her in marriage.”

I recounted what had happened a few days ago at Pavol: my discoveries, my blindness, and Juno’s hesitation. I wept bitterly at the end of the narrative, for my grief was very real.

The curé, who was undecided until then as to whether he should take my words and troubles seriously, looked the very picture of

consternation. He drew his chair close by mine, took my hand, and endeavored to reason with me.

“Your cousin hesitates, you say? Then perhaps the marriage will not take place.”

“What difference does that make, since he loves her? No one ever loves twice.”

“It sometimes happens, my dear child.”

“I won’t believe it; it would be too frightful! I am very unfortunate, my poor curé.”

“Have you told your uncle?”

“No, but he has guessed my thoughts. What good can his knowing it do, anyway? He cannot compel Paul to love me and forget his daughter. Besides, I would not for the world have Paul know anything; I would rather die!”

A long silence followed this revelation of my pride. We gazed into the fire, like two harmless little fortune-tellers, anxious to read the secrets of the future in the flame and the burning coals.

But the flames and the coals were dumb, and I was weeping silently, when the curé resumed, with a half smile:

“Yet he bears no resemblance to either Francis I. or Buckingham!”

“Ah, M. le Curé,” I answered spiritedly,

“if Francis I. and Buckingham were here now, they would be nothing loth to fall in love with me, and nothing would please me better, either.”

“Hum !”

The curé evidently thought this reply anything but orthodox, and subject to demoralizing interpretations. He abandoned hastily the topic he had just touched on, bristling as it was with dangers, and preached resignation instead.

“Just only think how young you are, Reine ! This trial will pass, and you have a long life before you.”

“I am not of a resigned disposition, M. le Curé, and you may as well know it. If I live, it is my determination never to marry ; but I shall not live, I am consumptive ; listen !”

And I tried to force up a hollow cough.

“This is no subject for jesting, Reine. Thank God, you are in fine health !”

“There’s no use in me talking,” I said, rising, “I see you don’t want to believe me. Let us take advantage of this fine weather, and of the last few moments of life left me, and pay a visit to Le Buisson, M. le Curé.”

We strolled along towards my old home, under a pleasant November sun, infinitely

less genial and warming than the affection of my curé and the sight of his kindly face, which had become quite rosy since my arrival. It was a pleasure in itself to watch his hair as it tossed about in the wind, his nimble gait, his joyous, lusty figure, and to recall the time when I had looked out for him so often through a window in the corridor, while the rain lashed the panes and the wind roared and whistled through the dilapidated doors of the old mansion.

After a visit to Suzon and Perrine I rambled over the house from top to bottom. In good truth, the real measurement of time is not the number of days that may have elapsed, but the number and acuteness of our perceptions. Just only a few weeks before, I had abandoned this tumble-down barracks, and if any one had told me that since then several years had glided over my head I should have accepted the statement as entirely correct.

I dragged the curé into the garden. Poor old wilderness! It reminded me of some melancholy days, and yet I had a certain feeling of pleasure in wandering through it again.

And besides, it carried my thoughts back

to some delightful hours — hours the memory of which still had a charm for me, notwithstanding the bitter disappointment that had followed a moment's happiness.

“ You recollect, M. le Curé ? ” said I, pointing to the cherry tree Paul had climbed.

“ Try to think of something else, Reine.”

“ But how can I, M. le Curé ? If you knew how fond I am of him ! He has not a single fault, I assure you ! ”

Once I had started on this subject there was no power, human or superhuman, that could stop me, particularly as I was compelled at Pavol to hide my feelings. I spoke so long that I almost made the poor curé light-headed.

We passed the evening gossiping and arguing. The curé exhausted his oratorical powers in the effort to prove to me that resignation is one of the most precious and most easily acquired of virtues.

“ My good curé,” I answered impressively “ you do not know what love is.”

“ Believe me, Reine, you can easily forget this trial and get the best of it, if you have a mind to. You are so young ! ”

So young ! — he always wound up with that. As if a person did not suffer as much

at sixteen as at any age whatever ! These old men take away one's breath !

On my side, I kept on repeating, gravely shaking my head the while,

“ You do not understand, M. le Curé, you do not understand ! ”

The next day, while we were walking in the garden, I said :

“ M. le Curé, I was turning an idea over in my mind last night.”

“ Well, let us have your idea, little one.”

“ I should like you to have the parish of Pavol.”

“ But I cannot oust another priest from his place, Reine.”

“ The pastor of Pavol is as old as the hills, M. le Curé, and he is aging faster and faster every day. I am noting the signs of his increasing debility with tender solicitude. Would you not like to succeed him ? ”

“ Well — yes ; though I should feel some regret at leaving my present parish. I have been here thirty-five years, and, naturally, I am now very much attached to it.”

“ *Now* ? Then you have not always liked it ? ”

“ No, Reine. You are aware that it is a rather melancholy spot. Perhaps it has never

occurred to you that I was once young. My dreams were not then precisely the same as yours, my dear child, but I should have liked an active life; I should have liked to see and hear a great many things, for I was not without brains, and I yearned for certain intellectual resources which I have always missed obtaining. Then, before you came into my life, I had no friend or confidant near me. But we can rise superior to ennui and every other trouble, Reine, when we try to do so with our whole heart and soul. I was very happy for a long time until you left Le Buisson. I had forgotten the sad, dreary days of my youth."

The good curé looked straight before him, somewhat dreamily, and I who had always seen him so merry and contented, and who had never for a moment thought it possible that there might have been a sorrowful period in his existence, — I was moved to the very depths of my heart in presence of a resignation so true and gentle and unembittered.

"You are a saint, my dear curé," I said, taking his hand.

"Tut, tut, my dear child, don't talk nonsense! I have suffered from certain limitations that affect all my brethren whose minds

are youthful and active. I have talked to you on this subject with the view of bringing home to you the fact that everything can be endured, and that happiness, and even gayety, can be recovered when our trials are past, provided we have endured them courageously."

I understood very well, but it was so much breath spent in vain. I was too young not to be very positive in my convictions, and I naturally believed that there is no sorrow in the world to be at all compared to an unrequited affection.

"Should the parish of Pavol ever become vacant, Reine, I should like to go there; but, of course, such a change cannot depend on me."

"Yes, I know that, but my uncle has great influence with the bishop and can easily arrange the matter."

The curé was my escort as far as C—.

When he saw me seated in my uncle's elegant landau he cried:

"How glad I am to see you in your proper place at last, my little Reine! That carriage agrees better with you than Jean's carryall."

"You will soon be coming to see me in a

fine château," I answered. "I am going to offer up a novena¹ for the purpose of obtaining the curé of Pavol's translation to heaven as speedily as possible. I am obeying strictly the precepts of charity in doing so, for he is old and suffering. You'll have a beautiful church, M. le Curé, and a pulpit, a real great big pulpit!"

The horses started and I leaned forward to get a view of my old curé as long as I could. He was making friendly signs to me, and he had quite forgotten to put on his hat, for a joyful hope had found a lodgment in his heart.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE salutary effect the curé's visit had on me was but short-lived; I soon became as despondent as ever, and my uncle, while inwardly cursing and swearing at women, especially when they happened to be nieces, and reviling their wrongheadedness and caprices generally, spoke of taking Blanche and me to Paris with the view of distracting my mind, some way or other,

¹ A nine-days' devotion used by Catholics for the purpose of obtaining some special grace from God. — *Tr.*

when, luckily, certain events outstripped his best-laid plans.

Some days before the time I am speaking of, M. de Pavol received a letter from a friend requesting permission to introduce one of his cousins, a M. de Kerveloch, ex-attaché to an embassy. My uncle gave a cordial reply, saying he should be delighted to receive M. de Kerveloch, and inviting him to luncheon, with never a suspicion that he was paving the way for the advent of a crisis that was to overturn his fondest ambitions and quicken once again all my hopes of happiness.

On the third day following — good reason have I for enshrining that immortal day eternally in my memory — the weather was abominable.

As usual, we were all assembled in the parlor. Blanche was musing near the fire, and her answers to M. de Conprat were confined to monosyllables. That headstrong lover had not been able to endure his exile, and had appeared again on the scene, just forty-eight hours previously. My uncle was reading his newspaper, and I had taken refuge in a recess of one of the windows.

At one moment I was feverishly occupied

with my needlework, for needlework is my passion, at another, gazing at the murky sky and the rain which fell continuously. I listened to the roaring of the wind — that November wind that shrieks so dismally. I felt weary, gloomy, and had not the slightest premonition of that happiness in the future which was now speeding towards me at as rattling a pace as could be made by two fine horses.

From time to time I stole a glance at Paul. His eyes were riveted on Blanche with an expression that made me want to strangle him.

“How silly he looks,” I thought, “with those motionless, staring, stupid eyes of his! Ah, yes! but were I in Blanche’s place, were he to fix his eyes on me as he has them fixed on her, I should regard him as charming, more attractive than ever. Oh, how absurd and inconsistent we poor mortals be!”

And I plied my needle with such wrathful violence that it broke in the middle.

At that moment the noise of a carriage approaching the château came to our ears. My uncle folded his paper. Juno listened eagerly and said, “A visitor!” A few moments later my uncle’s friend and the attaché were in the room.

I cannot account for the fact that I had always associated an attaché with old age and baldness. But M. de Kerveloch was neither old nor bald, and, except Francis I., as depicted in his portrait, I had never seen a man before with such a splendid physique.

As soon as he entered, the thought came into my mind that that fine head of his entertained some ideas connected with matrimony. He was about thirty, and so tall that Paul seemed quite a pigmy beside him. He had an intellectual and decidedly haughty expression; indeed, no one, after giving him a second glance, would be inclined to crown him with a halo of sanctity. He was rather cold, but courteous almost to excess, and his high-bred ways and ease of manner vanquished Blanche on the spot.

M. de Kerveloch regarded her with evident admiration, and, when he rose to take leave and stood beside her, I noticed, with secret delight, that it would be impossible to find a better matched pair.

Every one, I fancy, must have thought the same, for when Paul left us his face wore a look of utter gloom. Juno played, ten times in succession, the last piece composed by Weber, or something equally tiresome, a

clear proof, in her case, that her mind was far away, while my uncle examined both of us by turns with an expression that was both anxious and sarcastic.

M. de Kerveloch came to lunch the next day; three days afterwards he was a suitor for Blanche's hand, and, when two weeks had elapsed, I wrote to my curé :

“My dear curé, man is a fickle, wayward, capricious little animal; a weathercock, entirely at the beck of his imagination or of circumstances. When I say “man” I wish you to understand I am speaking of humanity in general, for the person who addresses you is to-day the little animal in question.

“I am no longer in a state of despair, and am not at all anxious to die, my good curé. I have just discovered that the sun has renewed his splendor; that it is not unlikely the future may have a store of happiness treasured up for me; that the universe does well to continue its revolutions, and that the Creator never invented anything more stupid than death.

“Blanche is to be married, M. le Curé! Blanche is to be married to Comte de Kerveloch! Ye gods! how well they suit each other! And she was within an atom, an ace,

an inch, of accepting M. de Conprat — a man she did not love and whom she found fault with for eating too much ! Eating too much, indeed ! Did you ever hear of anything so absurd ? Is it not the right thing to eat heartily when you have a good appetite ?

“If you ask me why it is that such extraordinary changes have occurred at Pavol I am afraid I can hardly answer you. I am bewildered about everything, but I can tell you this much : One fine day, one sunny day — but that is n’t true, the rain was coming down in torrents — one day, I repeat, M. de Kerveloch came here with a friend of my uncle. As soon as I saw him I guessed he was revolving some idea in his head ; I guessed, too, that he was likely to find favor in Blanche’s eyes, for he was just the sort of husband she was always dreaming about. M. de Kerveloch looked at her in a way that showed he was a man who knew how to appreciate beauty, and, some days afterwards, he solicited the honor of her hand — to adopt the language of my uncle and of etiquette.

“Juno, thereupon, lost her ordinary composure, and declared warmly that ‘never had she been so pleased with any fair knight as

she was with this one, and that she was resolved to dismiss M. de Conprat.'

"And now you have it all, my dear curé. I have made the matter, I hope, clear and simple. Ever since then I dream by the light of the stars, as I used to do of old; I give free rein to my imagination and send it galloping along until it is fairly tired out, and I dance round my room when I am quite alone! Ah, my dear curé, I can't tell why, but to-day I love you ten times more than ever. Never has that dear face worn such a smiling aspect, never has your affection for me appeared so touching, so worthy of my love, and never has your beautiful white hair looked so charming in my eyes.

"To-day the leafless woods wore a robe of verdant foliage, the gray skies were really a deep blue, and, all of a sudden, my imagination and I became friends once more. I shall repent, during the whole course of my life, of the shameful way in which I treated her the other day. She is a fairy, my dear curé, a fairy of infinite charm, a fairy instinct with power and with poetry, and when she touches the ugliest things with her magic wand they take on the coloring of her own beauty.

"What a changeable creature the little an-

imal is, really! — I cannot get over my astonishment. What is the source of our joys and hopes? Why should we ever despair, when things can fall into their places without any interference on our side? And yet, how can I feel so happy when my future is still undecided and when I reflect that no one can love twice during life? Ah, my dear curé, in what a state of chaos everything is! — nothing but mystery in this world; the soul is an unfathomable abyss. I rather think some one has said this before me; indeed, for all I know, I may have read it no later than yesterday, but I am quite intelligent enough to have given birth to such a thought myself.

“However, when my excitement cools down, those pleasant fancies of mine are seized with an irresistible panic; they break away, fly off at a tangent, are scattered in all directions, and I find it often impossible to catch hold of them again. For, do what I may, he loves her! Oh, M. le Curé, he loves her! Loves her! What an odious phrase, used as I am using it now!

“You told me, M. le Curé, that it is not altogether unusual for a man to be in love twice in his life; but are you sure? Is it

your downright conviction? Love, it has been said, engenders love; do you think, if he were to know my secret, he would love me? You have much common sense, M. le Curé; do you not believe, then, conventionalities to be idiotic? Probably, all that is needed to make me happy for life is simply a confession on my side, and, lo and behold! in march certain laws, invented by some wiseacre or other, and prevent me from obeying my inclination, disclosing my secret thoughts and revealing my love to him I love! To be candid, there is something also at the bottom of my own heart that would force me to keep silence, and — did I not tell you the soul is an unfathomable abyss? My dear curé, I can see a procession of darksome ideas making its way towards me. My stars, but does n't it take little to unsettle this poor human nature of ours!

“Doubtless ideas alter with circumstances. My uncle even goes so far as to say that the fools are the only people who never change their opinions. But is it the same with the heart as with the head?”

“Make this point clear to me, my dear curé.”

When M. de Pavol had once decided on any plan there was no beating about the

bush in his case ; it had to be executed at the earliest possible date. Acting on this principle, he determined that the marriage of Blanche should be celebrated on the fifteenth of January.

Although he was considerably disappointed, he did not care to thwart his daughter's inclination, especially as he had discovered my love for Paul. He was honest and fair-minded, and was too generous to cling to his own wishes very obstinately when they stood in the way of his niece's happiness.

As for Paul, he bore his misfortune courageously. Like the diminutive person who loved him so fondly, without his ever suspecting it, he had not the slightest desire of revenge. I am in a position to bear witness that he had never entertained any idea of poisoning his rival or cutting his throat in gentlemanly fashion in a corner of some lonely and poetic wood.

When he knew he must give up all hope he came to see us, accompanied by the major, and offered Blanche his hand, saying, in a tone of evident sincerity :

“Cousin, I desire only your happiness, and I hope we shall remain good friends.”

But, although he behaved with a propriety

and honesty that are not often found except on the stage, he suffered deeply. His visits to Pavol became very rare. When I saw him I noticed that he was changed morally and physically.

Then I wept again many bitter tears in secret, and felt violently angry with him besides. He ought to have fallen in love with me, according to all the rules of logic! Surely, he should see that our two natures were in extraordinary harmony, and that I loved him to distraction!

In good truth, if men always acted according to the rules of logic the world would not be at all the worse for it, and we should have a higher type of humanity before long.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON the 15th of January we had splendid weather, although the day was piercingly cold. The country with its covering of hoar frost presented a fairy-like aspect. Juno was extremely pale, and looked so beautiful in her white robes that I could not keep my eyes off her. I compared her to the cold and magnificent landscape whose dazzling whiteness seemed in unison with her beauty.

After breakfast she retired to her room to change her dress. She came downstairs in a state of great emotion. We all embraced her, and were very much affected also, and then — hey, for Italy!

All these emotions that had been thronging on me of late wore me out, and I yearned for solitude. Leaving my uncle, then, to get along with his guests as best he could, I wrapped myself in a warmly-lined cloak and made for a certain place in the park which had a particular charm for me.

This park was crossed by a narrow and rapid river. At a certain point in its course it widened and formed a cascade which a skilful arrangement of stones had made high and picturesque. A few yards from the cascade a tree had fallen, the foot resting on one steep bank and the head on the other. For some time no one noticed it, and when, in the following spring, my uncle visited it, intending to have it removed, he discovered, by the vigorous branches that were growing the whole length of the trunk, that there was plenty of life in it. He ordered another tree to be placed beside the first, their branches to be intertwined, vines to be planted to run along the two stumps, and in course of time the

branches and vines became so thick that my uncle had a rustic and unique bridge which could be crossed with no greater danger than that of getting entangled in the branches and falling into the water.

This was the lonely spot, which was at a considerable distance from the château, that I had chosen as the theatre of my meditations. I halted near the frost-covered bridge in order to reflect on the future and admire the enormous icicles hanging from the cascade, which the ice had arrested in its course.

I do not know how long I was absorbed in my reflections, never taking thought of the cold that nipped my face, when I saw the "object of my tenderness," as Madame Cottin¹ would say, advancing towards me.

And a very melancholy and ill-tempered object he seemed. With a cane which in a moment of distraction he had lately stolen from my uncle he was whacking energetically at the trees that happened to come in his way, and the white dust that covered them was scattered all over him.

I half turned my back on him, but it is a matter of public notoriety that women have

¹ The authoress of "Elizabeth; or, the Exiles of Siberia," a sentimental novel very popular over half a century ago. — *Tr.*

eyes behind them, and I did not lose a single one of his movements.

When he was near me he crossed his arms and gazed at the motionless cascade, the trees, and the bridge, but did not open his mouth.

Apparently engaged in stripping a little pine branch I had just broken off, I held my breath and looked at him askance, without any suspicion on his part that he was under observation.

“Cousin” — he began.

“Is that you, cousin?” I returned, and waited for him to finish what he had to say. But, seeing he was not inclined to go on, I condescended to turn half round again and face the speaker in order to encourage him.

He frowned and cried out violently :

“I have a mind to blow my brains out !”

“Very well,” said I dryly, “I will go to your funeral.”

This answer so astonished him that he dropped his arms and stared at me.

“You would not prevent me from committing suicide, cousin ?”

“Certainly not,” I replied tranquilly. “Why should I interfere in a matter that does not concern me ? I rather like to have my own freedom, and if you long to quit this

valley of tears, why should I lift a finger to hinder you ? Let every one act in this life as pleases him best ! ”

Upon which I became once more engrossed by my pine branch, while the object of my tenderness, disconcerted by the broad-minded fashion in which I regarded his doleful purpose, looked rather discomfited.

“ I thought you had a little affection for me, fair cousin. The first time you saw me you found me so amusing ! ”

“ Alas ! good cousin, what value could any one attach to the commendation of a little rustic whose only companions were a curé, a scolding aunt, and a surly cook ? ”

“ That means you were favorably inclined towards me because I was not a curé and my face was not as withered as that of Madame de Lavalle ? ”

“ You have hit the truth exactly, fair cousin. ”

He looked at me furiously, twisting his mustache wrathfully, and seizing his hat in his ill humor he hurled it on the bridge. Ah, how well I understood every emotion of his soul ! He was delighted to find any excuse for grumbling and was venting his anger and disappointment on me, just as I

had vented mine on the little terra-cotta statuettes and the unlucky Baron Maltour.

"Your aunt was a horrible old woman, mademoiselle," he said abruptly.

"My fine eyes were a compensation for her, monsieur," I answered with equal bluntness.

"And such a table! and such a set of dishes! Weren't they grand! And everything where it oughtn't to be!"

"Yes, but then, the turkey! How is it you're alive? I was dead sure an indigestion had carried you off, and you can conceive my amazement when I met you here, as large as life!"

"I know it is useless trying to have the last word with you, mademoiselle. Still, when all is said, I have not proved such a very bad cousin. What harm have I ever done you?"

"None that I know of, I am sure. And, as a proof of my good feeling I have made you a promise to follow your body to its last home."

"My body?" he cried, with a shiver. "I'm not yet dead, mademoiselle. I may as well inform you that I have not the slightest intention of killing myself and that I am on the point of starting for Russia."

"I wish you a pleasant journey, cousin."

He walked off, and, thinking of the length of time that might elapse before I should set eyes on him again, I wrung my hands in despair, and big tears were beginning to roll down my cheeks, when I saw him coming back at a run.

"Come, now, Reine, why should you and I quarrel? Why should there be any bicker—What! you are crying?"

"I was thinking of Juno," I answered, speaking in a natural tone, though with an effort.

"I see, my little cousin; you will be quite alone now. You'll shake hands with me, won't you?"

"Willingly, Paul."

Alas! he did not kiss my hand, but took hold of it in a very melancholy fashion. He was thinking of a hand he had once hoped would be his.

And he left me, and did not return a second time.

In spite of the cold, to which I did not pay the slightest attention, I sat down near the bridge and wept, and, leaning over the river, I saw my tears falling on the ice.

"When he talks of blowing his brains

out," I said to myself, "his affection for her must be boundless! I am well aware he won't do anything of the kind, but he is probably as much enamored of her as I am of him, and I feel absolutely certain it would be impossible for me ever to forget him. Is it not stupid of him to fall in love with a woman who is the exact opposite of him in every respect, while near him he has a little" —

"What are you doing there, Reine?" said my uncle, who was quite close to me before I had the slightest idea of his presence, for I had not heard his footsteps.

I rose quickly, ashamed at not being able to conceal my emotion.

"What! you are crying?"

"Uncle, are n't men stupid?"

"What you say is undoubtedly true, niece. Is that the reason I find you in tears?"

"Paul has a mind to blow out his brains," said I, sobbing.

"Do you think him the sort of person to go to such extremes as that?"

"No," I answered, smiling in spite of my tears. "That would not be like him at all. But the mere idea of such a thing having entered his head proves that" —

“Oh, yes, I know what you mean. The idea proves that he still loves my daughter. But believe me, he will forget her very speedily, and, when he returns, we'll take good care that his heart does not go straying any more.”

“But do you really believe, uncle, a man can love twice in his life without being a monster?”

M. de Pavol patted my cheek and looked at me with a pity that was as much a tribute to my inexperience as to my distress.

“My poor little niece, the men who love but once in their lives are as rare as white blackbirds.”

“Then, uncle, man is an odious animal!” I said in a tone of conviction.

But I was as jubilant as I was indignant, and I asked for nothing better than to turn the wickedness inherent in human nature to account.

“Yet Juno is so beautiful!”

“Look at yonder bridge to which you are so much attached, Reine. Before the branches and plants that cover it have renewed their verdure Paul will have forgotten her; before the leaves have turned sere and fallen anew he will be back at Pavol, and” —

He smiled significantly, then went off, leaving the sentence unfinished; and, utterly bewildered, I followed his footsteps with my eyes, saying to myself that uncles who foretell the future with such assurance are truly very singular personages.

“It is all very well,” I thought, returning slowly homeward, “but what if his heart should change and he should become smitten with some woman or other in his travels? And now I remember hearing that Russian women are very beautiful! He must be prevailed on to spend the time he is away among the Esquimaux!”

I took to my heels immediately, and reached the door of the château just at the very moment the major was getting into his carriage.

I seized his arm and drew him aside.

“Major, is Paul about to set out for Russia?”

“Yes; the matter is settled.”

“I have been thinking — if you have no objection — that, on the whole, — I was thinking — it would be better if” —

Decidedly it was harder than I thought. My pride stood in the way, and was telling me to keep silence.

“Come, my dear child, out with what you have to say ; I am freezing here.”

“The die is cast !” I cried violently, stamping on the ground.

My pride and I were now across the Rubicon, and I said, lowering my eyes :

“Dear major, I entreat you to advise Paul to travel among the Esquimaux.”

“And why among the Esquimaux ?”

“Because the women of that country are frights,” I stammered ; “and Russian women are very beautiful.”

The good major raised my face, now crimson with confusion, and said simply :

“Your request is granted ; I will advise Paul to travel among the Esquimaux.”

“How I love you !” I said, with tears in my eyes, as I pressed his hand. “But tell him not to stay long in the huts of these people ; he might be laid up with illness ; the odor, I have been told, is unendurable.”

And, seeing my uncle coming towards us, I fled, saying :

“Major, a man of honor has only his word ; be faithful to yours !”

I entered my room, laboring under the exceedingly unpleasant conviction that I had imitated the government to perfection, and

had trampled under my feet every principle of dignity. But, pshaw ! the only way to get out of a difficulty is to help yourself. This reflection quieted my scruples. I sat down before my desk and wrote :

“All is over, M. le Curé ! They are married ; they went away, evidently in a state of rapture, and I would have given ten years of my life to be in Juno’s place with one you know of. Shall I ever reach such good fortune ?

“Do you know what my uncle has been telling me ? He says that men who love only once in their lives are as rare as white blackbirds. My dear, dear curé, I beseech you, when you say mass to-morrow, to offer it with the intention of keeping M. de Conprat from becoming a white blackbird.”

“Good-by, M. le Curé ; I hope to see you soon in your parish of Pavol !”

CHAPTER XIX.

AND, indeed, the only event of any importance that occurred towards the close of the winter was the installation of the curé into the parish of Pavol, and it is

unnecessary to allude to our happiness on finding ourselves together again, especially as there was no longer any danger of a separation in the near future.

It was the renewal of a by-gone pleasure to see him ascending his pulpit and preaching, with beaming face, on the iniquity of mankind. After service he would come to the château, just as he used to do at Le Buisson, his soutane tucked up, his hat under his arm, and his hair streaming in the wind.

We resumed our conversations, our discussions, and our quarrels. The time hung very heavy on my hands, and Juno's letters, breathing as they did the most perfect happiness, were not calculated to set my heart at ease or arm me with patience. And so I was continually running after my curé and confiding to him my cares, anxieties, and hopes, as well as my feelings of rebellion against the suspense I was forced to endure.

I knew, alas! that my "object" had not taken kindly to the notion of going among the Esquimaux. He was quietly rambling about in the streets of St. Petersburg, and the thought of the beautiful Russian ladies troubled me terribly.

“Are you sure he will not fall in love with a Russian, M. le Curé?”

“We must hope so, at least, Reine.”

“Hope so? Pray give a plain answer to a plain question, M. le Curé. What do you think? Oh, it is not possible he could fall in love with a foreigner! Do tell me, my dear curé, that it is not possible, and tell me, too, that he is sure to love me some day or other.”

“I ardently hope so, my poor child; but it would be better to expect the contrary and try to be resigned to it.”

“You and your resignation will drive me crazy, my dear curé.”

“Ah, Reine, I am afraid you have very little wisdom!”

“Wisdom in my opinion consists in wishing to be happy. Tell me that he will love me, my curé; do so, I beseech you!”

“Why, there is nothing in the world could give me more pleasure than his loving you, my dear child,” answered the curé, who, in spite of his terror of physical suffering, would, I really think, have followed the example of Mucius Scævola and burned his right hand, were the sacrifice necessary to ensure my happiness.

Nevertheless, in spite of my satisfaction at having my curé so near to me, in spite of the kindness of my uncle and all those around me, I became very sad.

I grew fond of solitary rambles in the wood, or of lingering whole hours by the cascade, dwelling on our last interview, wondering what I should do if he stood before me, gay and charming, his eyes shining with that expression which had so delighted me at Le Buisson, but which had never afterwards shone for me !

This fondness for solitude developed daily, and my melancholy in proportion. At length I gradually lost all my former relish for talking, and if M. de Pavol had not been already convinced of the depth of my love this fact alone would have proved it to him.

Six months slipped by in this fashion.

One day—it was the anniversary of my arrival at Pavol—I was seated in the garden of the presbytery. Two hours before, a rain-storm had cooled the atmosphere and watered the curé's flowers. He was finding amusement in a hunt after snails, while I, feeling in a pleasant state of mind at the time, leaned my head against the wall near the bench on which I was sitting, and occupied my fancy

with joyous anticipations. The falling of the raindrops, which were bending the leaves under their weight, alone disturbed my meditations, and the odor of the damp earth reminded me of the pleasantest hours of my life.

Now and then, the curé said :

“The number of snails is really astonishing ! Just think, Reine ! I have found more than five hundred !”

I raised my head carelessly and smiled at the good curé, who was eagerly continuing his search. Then I fell anew into my reveries and, at last, into a sort of slumber.

I was awakened by the creaking of the garden gate, and the sound of a merry voice I knew caused me the most violent agitation I have ever experienced in my whole life.

“Good-day, my dear curé, how goes it ? I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you. Where’s Reine ?”

Reine was still in the same place, unable to speak or move.

“Ah, there she is !” cried Paul, striding towards me at a great rate. “My dear cousin, it would be impossible to express my delight at meeting you again.”

He seized my hand and kissed it.

I declare, with all solemnity, that what followed was totally independent of my will and should not give rise to ill-natured suppositions. And I declare, with still more solemnity, that I struggled against the temptation, but when I felt his kiss on my hand, when I knew that this act was not inspired by a mere commonplace gallantry, but by a sentiment far more profound, when he leaned over me, gazing at me with an expression that was at once anxious, affectionate, and singular, an expression a hundred times more enchanting than any I had ever dreamed of, — I could not help it, and fate, in which I have ever since believed, took me in its grasp and flung me into his arms.

I had hardly time to feel the embrace that responded to my impulsive outburst. I fled, blushing and confused, to the bench, and covered my face with my hands, though this did not hinder me from getting a glimpse of the curé, whose air of mingled stupefaction, anger, and delight often came back to me afterwards.

“Dear Reine,” murmured Paul in my ear, “if I had known your secret sooner, I should not have stayed away so long and so far from your side.”

I did not answer, for I was weeping.

He took one of my hands and held it in his, while, overpowered by a feeling of timidity I had never experienced before, I turned my head away from him and tried to withdraw it.

“No, let me hold this pretty little hand; it is mine now. Turn your head round, Reine.”

I turned round and faced the fine, frank eyes that were smiling at me, crying:

“God be praised! my uncle was right, you are not a white blackbird!”

“A white blackbird?” said he, surprised.

“Yes, my uncle asserted — but no matter. Who told you what you were ignorant of at your departure?”

“My father, M. de Pavol, and many things I recollected during the last two months.”

“It is quite true, then, that love engenders love, is it not?” I asked innocently.

“Nothing could be truer, my dear little *fiancée*!”

How sweet that name sounded in my ears! There was silence between us for a time, while the curé wept for joy, and the sparrows on the roof of the presbytery kept up their noisy chirruping, and the snails, escaping from the prison in which the curé had confined them, ran about on all sides.

Undoubtedly, the sparrow cannot be called an interesting bird: his plumage is dull and ugly, his cry is harsh, and he has been accused of being thievish and immoral, a charge I refused to credit; nor am I aware, either, that there is anything very poetical about snails; but ever since that moment I have adored sparrows and snails.

I was in such a state of ecstasy that I feared I must be dreaming. I never grew tired of gazing at his face and listening to the voice I loved so well and feeling his hand in mine. Yet still, in spite of myself, the thought of her he had first loved haunted my mind and troubled my joy, though I did not dare to speak to him of my feelings.

“Does my uncle know you are here, Paul?”

“Yes; I have come from Pavol, and I was firmly resolved to come alone in search of you. Does not the wet garden bring back something to your memory, Reine?”

I did not answer his question directly, I only said:

“But you—you have not retained any pleasant recollections of Le Buisson, have you?”

“Pleasant recollections? Well, I should

say so! I never spent such a delightful evening in my life!"

"Indeed?" I answered, looking at him sidewise; "but then, my aunt was so horrible, don't you think so?"

"No, no, not horrible, by any means. A little vulgar, perhaps; but the contrast only served to render you the more charming."

"And such a set of dishes! And everything where it ought n't to be!"

"I have never had so fine a dinner since. That tumble-down old barracks acted but as a foil to your beauty. You seemed like some flower that looked only the prettier and daintier because of the roughness and ugliness of the soil wherein it grew."

"Why, Paul, your travels have made you quite a poet!" I said smilingly.

"Oh, no, not at all, my little Reine!"

He passed my arm under his and led me aside.

"No, not a poet, cousin, but your lover. Listen well, Reine, — I love you as sincerely as woman was ever loved."

I enjoyed thoroughly the sweetness of his words and the look that accompanied them, and I said within my heart that it was fortunate, after all, men were so fickle.

Still, the change seemed to me incredible, and I could not help murmuring :

“Are you quite sure you no longer love her ? — that you do not love her just a little bit ? ”

“Should I speak to you as I do were it otherwise ? ” he answered very seriously.

“Have you no faith in my loyalty ? ”

“Oh, yes ! ” I cried, clasping his arm affectionately with both my hands.

And what I said was true ; after this answer of his the image of Blanche never troubled me again. I loved him unreservedly, without jealousy or distrust, and he well deserved my perfect faith in him.

“Why, yonder are my father and M. de Pavol, and they are evidently coming in this direction ! ”

“Well, niece, what is your opinion of my prediction now ? ”

“You have been very indiscreet, uncle,” I answered, blushing.

“It was the major who revealed the secret, Reine. He knew it ever so long ago.”

“Oh, no, only about eight months ago ! ”

“Is it possible ? ”

“And Paul did not go among the Esquimaux, after all,” said my uncle, laughing.

How fortunate are those who live among

kindly, open-hearted people! I had a keen sense of this good fortune when I realized how heartily all my friends shared in my joy, and with what delicacy and good-nature they touched jestingly on that famous secret into which I had, unconsciously, let the whole world.

Then began that most delightful of times, the time of our engagement. There is no period in the life of any one so exquisite as this. Nothing can ever replace the artless love, the entire faith, the childlike illusions that mark its course. Ah, how I pity those who have never experienced such love as this! How I pity those who have been hurled by their own folly far from the common, beaten track and the safe pathway of legitimate affection! I can never, never believe, no matter how eloquent be the words employed to convince me, that real love can exist except it have esteem for its foundation.

We spent some of our pleasantest days at the presbytery, chaperoned by the curé. We used to watch him as he bounced about in his garden, poling his plants, plucking up the weeds, and now and then pausing in his labors to dart a scrutinizing glance at the spot where we happened to be, in order to make us feel there was a vigilant mentor near at hand.

We interchanged a smile, for we knew something of old about the severity of this good-natured guardian of ours.

I approached my excellent friend, pretending to share his enthusiasm in connection with a flower, or shrub, or fruit, and said :

“My dear curé, do you remember the time when you tried to persuade me that love was not the most charming thing in the world?”

“Ah, my little child, I don’t think that even Bossuet himself could have convinced you to the contrary!”

“Come, now, be honest, was I not right?”

“I am beginning to believe you were,” he replied, with his kindly and fascinating smile.

The dawn of my wedding day arose in radiant splendor. Never had the heavenly canopy looked more magnificent in my eyes. I have been assured since then that, on the contrary, the skies were as dark and cloudy as they well could be, but I do not believe a word of it.

A sympathizing crowd filled the church, and such whispers could be heard as :

“What a pretty bride!” “How composed and happy she looks!”

It is, indeed, quite certain that my composure was wonderful.

But could I be otherwise than calm. The fondest desire of my heart was about to be fulfilled, a future of happiness was opening before me, and I had no anxiety about anything that could agitate me.

I had a confused glimpse of some dowagers who smiled on me as I passed, and I remember pitying them from my heart when I reflected that they were too old to marry.

The organ struck up such a joyous march that my prejudices against music were beginning to vanish somewhat. The altar was adorned with flowers and resplendent with tapers, and my eyes were delighted with all the decorative details, which were entirely due to the artistic taste of Juno.

My husband put the wedding-ring on my finger with an unsteady hand, biting his pretty mustache to conceal the trembling of his lips. He was far more moved than I was, and his eyes told me a tale I should like to hear repeated forever.

And if the entire earth and all the other planets of the universe were explored it would still have been impossible to find a face as radiant as that of my curé.

THE END.

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